

# 2025 PSYCHOSOCIAL SAFETY AWARDS FINALIST

Kerrie Sellen, Founder of Restorative Journeys

## FOCUS

Relational Leadership, Restorative Practice  
and Workplace Culture



# Background and Origin Story

## **Professional Roots**

Kerrie Sellen began her career in the youth industry, specifically within youth justice and guardianship systems.

## **The Catalyst for Change**

She observed a failing pattern of blame and punishment in schools, employment and criminal justice systems. She noted that traditional systems use isolation, separation and incarceration, which often fail to address the needs of traumatised individuals or the workers supporting them.

## **Founding Philosophy**

Kerrie returned to the youth sector on the condition that "things have to be done differently," moving away from doing the same things while expecting different results. She realised that practice makes the greatest difference, not programs.

# **Core Philosophy: Restorative Journeys**

## **Mission**

To build and sustain healthy relationships and repair harm when conflict occurs. The organisation places relationships at the centre of schools, organisations and communities.

## **The "Journey" Concept**

The name Restorative Journeys reflects the belief that people never fully arrive; everyone makes mistakes and gets "spiky" (defensive or reactive), and the focus is on how to navigate those ruptures.

## **Conflict vs. Combat**

A central tenet is that "conflict is normal; combat is optional".

# The Four Pillars of Restorative Practice

Kerris developed four pillars to structure her approach:

1

**Self**: Self-regulation and the ability to reconnect when things go wrong

2

**Collegially**: How colleagues build healthy relationships and normalise conflict resolution between themselves

3

**Young People/Families (Clients)**: Being restorative with the communities and people they serve

4

**Explicit Practice**: Making the framework accessible and explicit to everyone in the organisation, not just leadership

# Key Methodologies and Tools

## Affect Biology and Shame

The framework teaches staff about **affect biology** and the **Compass of Shame**. It recognises that when **feeling good** is interrupted, a shame response is triggered.

- **Reactions to Shame:** Withdrawal, attacking others, avoidance or attacking self.

## The Circle Process

Meetings are conducted in circles to democratise the space.

- **Types of Circles:** Welcome/goodbye circles, problem-solving circles, conflict circles and "high fives" (celebrating successes) or critical reflections (discussing mistakes).
- **Efficiency:** Using circles to resolve problems quickly (e.g., 15 minutes) rather than long, unstructured meetings.

## Explicit Practice Kits

Creating a shared language accessible to everyone – from the state manager to the cleaner – ensuring everyone knows how to ask questions that help people open up rather than shut down.



# Organisational Impact and Results

Implementing this framework resulted in significant operational improvements for Kerrie's organisation:

## Workplace Culture

Achieved a ranking as Australia's **6th best workplace culture** (Great Places to Work Australia)

## HR & Staffing

- Sick leave plummeted.
- No need to advertise for employees for the last five years of operation due to low turnover.
- Operated without a traditional HR department because staff took shared responsibility for culture.

## Violence Reduction

Reported a **41% reduction in violence** within six months in certain contexts.

# Scope of Work

**Restorative Journeys operates across various sectors:**

## **Schools:**

Ranging from small regional schools to large schools with 300 staff.

## **Higher Education:**

**Example:** Newcastle University (managing dynamics of 2,000 young adults living on campus).

## **Community-Wide Approaches:**

**Example:** Port Augusta, South Australia. This project involves Police, youth workers, correctional staff, and elders in a community of 20,000 people to create a unified language and approach.

# Leadership Insights

## **Vulnerability**

Leaders must create conditions where staff can be vulnerable. Kerrie emphasises that leaders do not need to have all the answers; the staff are the experts in their own experience.

## **No Surprises Policy**

A culture where staff feel safe enough to say they are looking for new work, allowing for healthy succession planning rather than abrupt resignations.

## **Top 3 Leadership Tips**

- **Give up having the answers:** Create a level playing field and co-design solutions with staff.
- **Take the whole community on the journey:** Do not leave the Board or key stakeholders behind.
- **Trust the process:** Be vulnerable and allow the relational focus to transform the culture.

# Here is how leaders can start applying each of the four pillars today.

## **Pillar 1: Self** (Regulation and Reconnection)

The work begins with the **leader's own ability to self-regulate**. Kerrie emphasises that when things go wrong, leaders must be able to **reconnect with themselves before they can connect with others**.

### **Understand "Affect Biology"**

Leaders should recognise that everyone, including themselves, has a "Compass of Shame." When feeling good is interrupted, a shame response is triggered.

### **Manage the "Spiky" Moments**

Kerrie notes that everyone gets "spiky" (defensive or reactive). Instead of withdrawing, attacking others or avoiding the issue, leaders must learn to stop, pause, and open up to sit with the vulnerability of the mistake.

### **Model Vulnerability**

Leaders do not need to have all the answers. Kerrie suggests creating conditions where it is safe to admit, "I don't have the answer," allowing staff to see the leader's humanity.



## **Pillar 2: Collegially** (Building Healthy Relationships)

This pillar focuses on **how staff treat one another**. The goal is to normalise and deal with conflict when it happens because conflict is normal; combat is optional.

### **Change the Meeting Structure**

Stop holding traditional meetings that lead to **analysis paralysis**. Instead, conduct meetings in circles.

- Use "**Welcome Circles**" to start the day and "**Goodbye Circles**" to end it.
- Implement "**Critical Reflections**": Dedicate time in meetings to sit in a circle and talk about mistakes to grow practice together, rather than hiding them.

### **Eliminate "Water Cooler" Culture**

Kerrie's organisation removed the unwritten rules of gossip. If a staff member is being "spiky," colleagues should feel empowered to ask, "Can we have a conversation?" rather than talking about them behind their back.



## **Pillar 3: Young People/Families (The Client Relationship)**

Leaders must ensure their organisation is "restorative with" the people they serve, rather than doing things "to" or "for" them.

### **Shift from Blame to Connection**

Kerrie observed that traditional systems (schools, justice, HR) rely on "blame and punishment," "isolation," and "separation". Leaders should pivot to a model that prioritises repairing harm and maintaining connection, even when rules are broken.

### **Let the Client be the Expert**

Leaders should create conditions for clients to "make sense of the meaning of where they're at" and determine what needs to change, rather than imposing solutions upon them.



## **Pillar 4: Explicit Practice (Accessibility)**

The final pillar ensures that the restorative framework is not just a management theory, but a shared language accessible to everyone.

### **Democratise the Language**

Kerrie insists that the framework must be understood by everyone, from the state manager to the cleaner and gardener.

### **Use Explicit Tools**

Deploy explicit practice kits or question cards (Socratic questioning) that help staff ask the right questions to open people up rather than shut them down.

### **Co-Design with Staff**

Kerrie advises leaders to "give up having the answers" and instead sit in a circle with staff to "nut this out" together. This creates a level playing field where everyone shares responsibility for the culture.

## **Immediate Leadership Actions**

**To jumpstart this process, Kerrie offers three specific tips for leaders feeling stuck:**

### **1) Give up having the answers:**

Create a level playing field and co-design the culture with your team.

### **2) Take the whole community on the journey:**

Do not leave the board or key stakeholders behind; ensure they understand the vision.

### **3) Trust the process:**

Be vulnerable, commit to the relational focus and trust that the culture will shift