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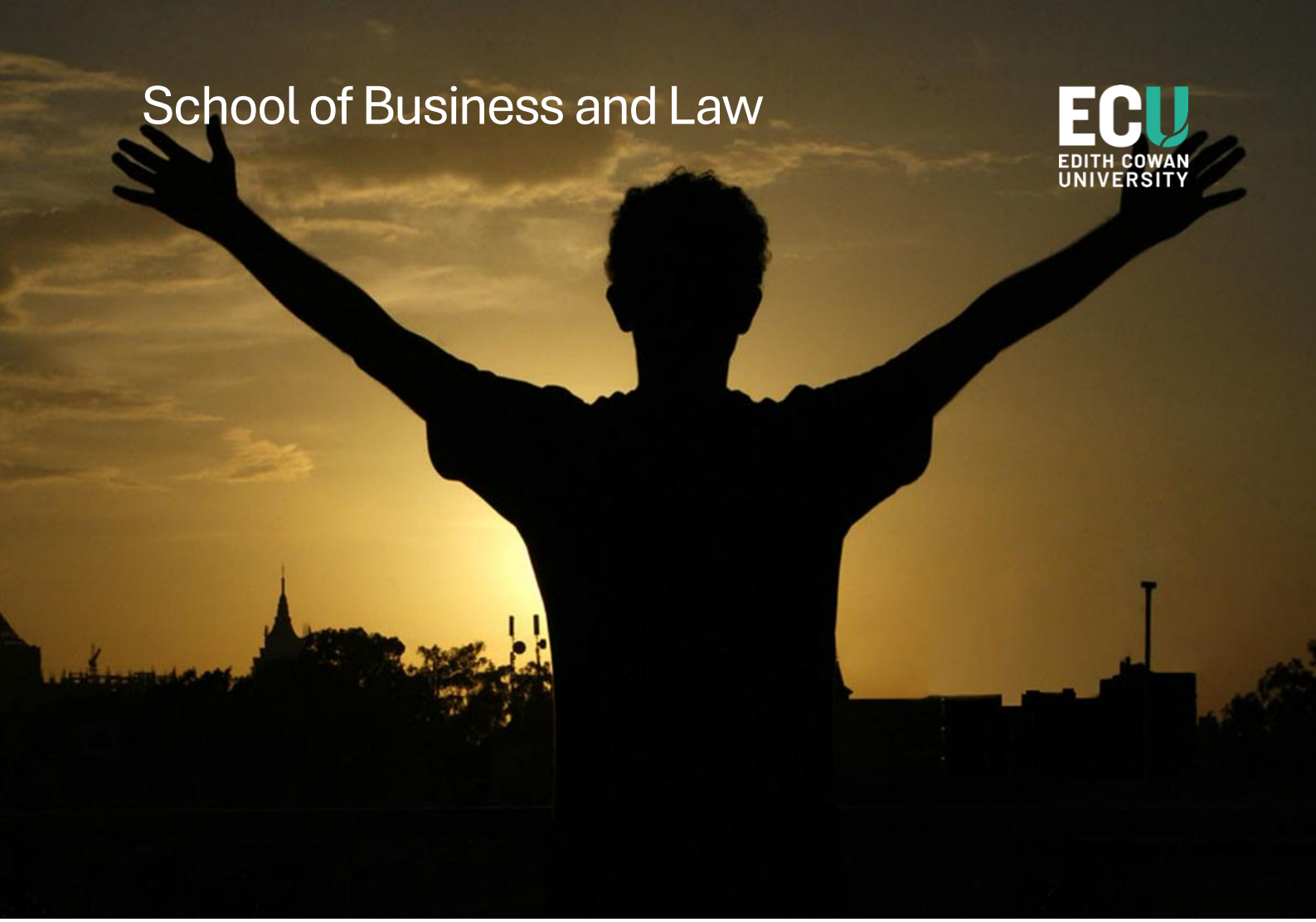

Unleashing Freedom in Chorus

A Teaching Case on Freedom-based Leadership in Community Sector Organisations

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Chorus

In a function room in a yacht club by the Swan River in sunny Perth Western Australia (WA), Chorus CEO and Strategic Coach Dan Minchin leaned forward in his chair, surrounded by colleagues in the monthly R'PER leadership forum. Around the room sat 40 representatives from local frontline teams (Locals), Enabling Partners, Enterprise Leads, and Strategic Coaches. Unlike traditional leadership team meetings, there was no 'head of the table', no agenda dominated by a chief executive. Instead, a rotating facilitator guided the conversation as voices from across the organisation shared updates, challenges, and ideas.

On this day, however, the usual collaborative energy carried an undercurrent of tension. The group had just reviewed the latest results from the organisation's Work on Wellbeing (WOW)[1] survey, a tool designed to measure how employees experienced factors such as autonomy, trust, and belonging at work. While overall scores remained high—particularly around meaning and purpose and supportive relationships — some Local Leads shared concerns which had been voiced in their teams, when going through the WoW results, about team members *feeling 'challenged by too much responsibility and autonomous decision making'* and wanting to simply *'ask for approval'*. As one Local Lead said:

> *"that's where I think that sometimes the gap is that you're trying to empower the team to take those responsibilities themselves, and although they've come so far, I still think some of them have trouble trying to let that go and being that independent person and autonomously like you say, making that decision"*

Others raised concerns about how to hold their peers accountable without the authority of a manager with one Enabling Partner saying:

> *"One of the challenges for us is how we hold people to account without going back to the old style of someone coming in and having a talk with that person and I'm letting them know that they're not operating in the way that we like and it's incredibly difficult not to go back to those ways of operating particularly."*

Another Enabling Partner reported that some Local Leads *"need a little bit more support to help them understand how leadership without authority could look within your Local?"* These thoughts resonated with those raised by a board member who expressed concerns that this way of working might not suit all people in saying:

> *"If the idea of freedom-based leadership resonates with you and is something either that you've always wanted or you didn't know you wanted, but you've experienced it and you think it's better, then you're going to be more prepared to become involved and you're going to thrive. But I don't know how much of that is imposed by the organisation versus comes*

[1] Chorus has been participating in Work on Wellbeing (WoW) surveys for several years and is tracking progress on dimensions. Information about this assessment is available at this link: https://workonwellbeing.com/

> *innately from the person, and that's where I think there's a question to be answered here like is this better for some than others?*

The question had been raised before, but never so directly. For years, Chorus had positioned itself as a pioneer of highly relational, freedom-based, autonomous and independent ways of working, rejecting the command-and-control hierarchies typical of Australia's aged care, disability, and mental health sectors. Employees were encouraged to make decisions collectively, enter into peer agreements rather than obey managers, and take responsibility for their own growth and development. These ways of working had been considered essential ingredients for fulfilling the organisation's purpose to enable local communities to thrive.

The model had won Chorus recognition, including the Australian Institute of Management (AIM) WA 2024 Pinnacle Award for People and Culture Excellence. It had also attracted attention from academics and practitioners studying self-management nationally and globally. Yet it also carried costs: regulators struggled to understand how accountability worked without managers; auditors asked, *"Who's the manager here?"* and some employees, used to hierarchy, felt lost or anxious.

Dan knew the tension well. An MBA educated experienced executive and strategy consultant, he had joined Chorus to help shepherd the merger of three WA care providers into a single, community-oriented organisation. From the outset, he had worked alongside an innovative Board to champion a move away from bureaucracy toward trust, autonomy, and relationships. But he also understood the paradox: the very freedom that inspired some employees left others adrift. Across the room, Donna Trebilcock, Enabling Leader for Coaching and Organisational Development, added her perspective:

> *"the ones that are still operating in that more hierarchical way, it's not because they don't believe in the model and it's not because they don't think it's a good thing. They're just not sure how to do it, you know, it's never been modelled to them before, and they've just not experienced it. So, for them it's a really, so it's a bunch of unlearning and then relearning."*

The room fell quiet again. The question now was not whether self-management could work—Chorus had already proven that it could—but whether it should be expected to work for everyone all the time with Dan noting the work could be *"all-consuming and exhausting at the same time as being rewarding and enriching."*

The debate touched on more than employee satisfaction. If too many workers felt uncomfortable with responsibility and autonomy, turnover could rise, threatening service continuity in the communities Chorus served. If external regulators and funders remained sceptical, Chorus risked losing critical contracts. Yet compromising on the model by reintroducing more hierarchy or managerial oversight risked betraying the very values that had defined the organisation since its founding.

For Dan and his colleagues, the dilemma was stark. They could decide to stay the course, holding fast to a philosophy of freedom, believing that with time and support, more people would adapt and thrive. They could adapt the model, introducing new structures for those less comfortable with

autonomy, even if it meant diluting the ideal of self-management. Or they could decide to find a middle ground, balancing freedom with guidance, inclusivity with philosophy. Aware of the consequences of this decision, Dan stated:

> *Our purpose drives everything we do. That's why we've built local, relational teams with the autonomy and independence they need to truly make a difference. These principles aren't just organisational choices—they're essential for creating care services that enable local communities to thrive. Traditional models, even with caring people, often lead to disengagement and low accountability. We believe care can—and must—be done differently. Our approach is about empowering people, transforming culture, and creating a broader societal impact. We need to get this right."*

As the meeting wound down, Dan scribbled a note in the margin of his agenda: *Does freedom, taking accountability and sharing of power really suit everyone?* It was a question that would not only shape the future of Chorus but also challenge broader assumptions about whether self-management could serve as a sustainable model in highly regulated industries worldwide.

Industry Context

Chorus did not exist in a vacuum. Its experiment with freedom-based leadership and self-managing teams unfolded within three of the most regulated, scrutinised, and politically sensitive service sectors in Australia: aged care, disability support, and mental health services. Each sector carried its own history of underfunding, public scandal, and reform—conditions that both created the need for new approaches and constrained the possibilities for innovation due in part to increased regulatory oversight. For Chorus's leaders, employees, and board, understanding this context was essential, because it shaped not only how the organisation delivered services but also how external stakeholders judged its legitimacy and funded service delivery.

Aged Care

By 2021, aged care in Australia had become a national controversy. Years of reports about neglect, understaffing, and unsafe facilities culminated in the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety. Its final report described systemic failures, from poor food and hygiene to chronic workforce shortages. Headlines such as *"Aged care in crisis"* dominated the news, sparking public outrage and political pressure.

The Commission's recommendations included: increased regulation and inspection, stronger governance requirements for providers, and clear lines of accountability for quality and safety. For most aged care providers, the response was to tighten control structures: appoint compliance managers, introduce detailed reporting systems, and create new layers of oversight. This trend reinforced traditional hierarchies.

The Commonwealth Home Support Programme (CHSP) and Home Care Packages (HCP) were two funding streams Chorus tapped into to provide Aged Care services, and these funding schemes

were also characterised by tightly controlled service definition, pricing and administrative reporting requirements.

Chorus had resisted the trend to reinforce hierarchy and centralise decision-making. Its Local teams were responsible for ensuring compliance, supported but not directed by enabling functions. To outsiders, this looked risky. Could a group of 10-20 Support Workers really be trusted with the accountability expected by regulators? For Chorus, the answer lay in relationships, agreements, communication and feedback; for regulators, the answer was not so obvious.

Disability Services

In disability care, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), introduced in 2013 and expanded nationwide by 2020, transformed funding and service delivery. Instead of block grants to providers, the NDIS allocated budgets directly to individuals with disabilities, who could then choose their own services and service providers. The scheme was intended to increase choice, competition, and innovation.

But the NDIS also brought complex compliance obligations. Every hour of support had to be documented, billed against codes, and justified according to an individual's plan. Providers faced audits not only of finances but of outcomes. Administrative burdens grew, and many small organisations struggled to keep up.

For Chorus, the NDIS created both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, its emphasis on personal choice aligned with Chorus's relational, community-based philosophy. On the other hand, the bureaucratic reporting requirements clashed with the ethos of minimising hierarchy and paperwork.

Mental Health

Mental health services in Australia were also undergoing transformation. The Productivity Commission Inquiry into Mental Health (2020) had highlighted the need for more community-based, preventative, and integrated services. Yet funding remained fragmented, split across federal, state, and non-government programs. The Commonwealth Psychosocial Support Program (CPS) with its own tight controls, was one of several funding streams Chorus tapped into.

In mental health too, scrutiny was high. Following reports of abuse and neglect in residential mental health services, the National Standards for Mental Health Services were strengthened. Providers had to demonstrate compliance across domains ranging from safety and quality to consumer rights and cultural responsiveness.

For a self-managing organisation like Chorus, this meant that local teams had to internalise not just care practices but also compliance knowledge. Unlike in hierarchical providers, where a compliance manager might design protocols and enforce them top-down, Chorus relied on shared agreements, training, and peer accountability.

Highly Regulated Systems

Across all three sectors, the pattern was clear: government responded to public failures with more regulation, more reporting, and more emphasis on individual accountability. For most providers, this translated into a thicker hierarchy. For Chorus, it translated into constant negotiation: how to demonstrate compliance without abandoning freedom.

In keeping with its commitment to shared decision-making and accountability, Chorus developed a system to assist with demonstrating compliance centred around common standards by which all roles/functions worked to. The standards were mapped to the Aged Care Quality Standards, the NDIS Quality and Safeguards and the National Standards for Mental Health Services. Oversight of the standards was provided by a Safety and Standards Commitment Forum made up of representatives from across the organisation.

Key features of the regulatory environment included: multiple funding streams, each with its own rules, codes, and billing structures (e.g., CHSP, HCP, NDIS, CPS); frequent audits where providers could face unannounced inspections, documentation reviews, and service quality audits; risk aversion as regulators preferred clear lines of responsibility; and public pressure as media stories of failure could lead to immediate political response, further tightening rules. For a board member at Chorus, these realities were never far from mind. As one director put it:

> *"The funders have a set of rules you have to engage with and meet those compliance rules, or they take away funding and therefore your business can't continue to operate. And so, it's great to be going off and you know, building community within the organisation, moving along a freedom-based leadership direction. But (…) we cannot be non-compliant. We have to be compliant. And so, managing the two worlds is, I think, a key to all of this."*

Chorus's operating model has been designed to ensure compliance with this complex regulatory framework, to enable service delivery within the funding framework in each sector while achieving the organisation's purpose and strategic objectives.

Workforce Pressures

Overlaying regulatory complexity was a national workforce crisis. Demand for care was rising sharply due to demographic trends; an ageing population, growing numbers of people living with disability, and increasing recognition of mental health needs. At the same time, workforce supply was constrained; low wages, high stress, and limited career progression led to chronic shortages.

Government reports estimated that by 2030, Australia would need tens of thousands more workers in aged care and disability support than current trends would supply. Providers scrambled to attract and retain staff, often competing in the same labour pool. Here Chorus's model presented both advantages and disadvantages: On the one hand, employees reported higher meaning, autonomy, and belonging, factors known to reduce turnover with Chorus's employee turnover sitting at 20%, well below the industry average of over 35%. On the other hand, some recruits, especially those

from traditional organisations, found the lack of hierarchy disorienting and left quickly. As one Enabling Lead observed:

> *"it's attracting people that are going to thrive in this way of working and really enjoy that and you know, feel like they're working meaningfully, but also be really up for working under this kind of a structure."*

Market Dynamics, Opportunities and Constraints

Australia's care, disability support and mental health sectors were populated by a mix of large national providers, small local charities, and for-profit companies. Large providers often benefitted from economies of scale in compliance and reporting. Small providers often struggled to meet regulatory demands. Chorus positioned itself somewhere in between: large enough to matter, though—via its Locals, small enough to stay connected to communities.

Competition was intense, especially under the NDIS where individuals could 'shop' for providers. Differentiation came through service quality, relationships, and reputation. Chorus's relational model resonated with many customers, but for others the lack of a visible manager raised doubts about reliability.

In this context, Chorus's freedom-based, self-managing model was both radical and precarious. On one hand, it promised to address systemic problems—by empowering workers, reducing bureaucracy, and strengthening community connections. On the other hand, it risked clashing with regulators, confusing funders, and alienating employees unready for autonomy.

Chorus's Story

In 2017, three established WA care providers, Volunteer Task Force, Community First International, and Care Options, merged to form a new for-purpose entity: Chorus Australia Limited. Each of the legacy organisations had decades of experience in aged care, disability support, and volunteering, but all three were struggling with the same issues: rising regulatory complexity, funding pressures, and workforce challenges.

The merger was not just a financial or operational consolidation. It was conceived as a chance to reimagine how care organisations could be run. Rather than build yet another bureaucracy with managers stacked in layers, the founding board envisioned a model rooted in community, autonomy, and trust. At the heart of this ambition was a question: Could a care service provider be run more like a network of community relationships than a hierarchy? Could frontline workers and volunteers, those closest to customers, be trusted to make most of the decisions?

The 'Chorus' brand was chosen deliberately. Just as in music, where many voices combine to create harmony, the organisation aspired to bring together diverse communities, staff, and volunteers into a unified whole where connections created benefits for all. The metaphor also signalled a departure from the idea of a single leader or conductor dictating the performance. Instead, Chorus would

strive for collective leadership, with each person contributing to the overall positive impact with mutual learning and growth.

This philosophy reflected a conviction shared by Dan and other leaders: that the wisdom to deliver excellent care resides not at the top, but with the people closest to the work and within customers themselves. Chorus articulated its **purpose** as: *'Enabling local communities to thrive.'* This statement encapsulated both the customer perspective (empowering individuals to shape their care and community participation) and the workforce perspective (empowering employees to shape how work was done). This purpose was supported by a **vision** of creating thriving, connected communities where people truly feel they belong and four codified values, remembered through the acronym R'PER:

Responsive – always listening, always learning, always improving.

Practical – doing whatever it takes to solve the problem.

Empowering – our people and the people we provide support to are equal and are the key to unlocking endless possibilities and boundless opportunities.

Respectful – always. With each other and with the communities we work in.

These values were not abstract; they were intended as daily guides for decision-making. For example, when staff were uncertain how to handle a new situation, they were encouraged to ask: *"Is this approach R'PER?"* If the answer was yes, they could proceed with confidence.

The purpose, vision and values were documented in the Strategic Plan 2024-2026 which articulated a commitment to Chorus's next transformation: from purely a service provider to a community connector creating impact through fostering well-being, building relationships and connecting in local communities.

Structural and Cultural Shift

When Dan became CEO, he inherited the immediate challenges of integrating three legacy organisations: different IT systems, divergent service models, and distinct organisational cultures. Many staff members were accustomed to reporting to managers and having decisions made above them.

Dan, the Chorus Board and leadership team saw the merger as an opportunity not only to unify systems but to innovate the model and reset culture drawing on the values of the merged entities. Rather than replicate traditional hierarchies, they moved deliberately towards a self-managing model inspired by international examples such as Buurtzorg in the Netherlands and Morning Star in the United States.

The transition required both structural changes and cultural shifts. Managerial roles were flattened or redefined. Staff were invited into conversations about how they wanted to work. Processes were

redesigned to encourage peer agreements and collaborative decision-making instead of top-down orders. As Dan later reflected:

> *"people have been talking about place-based models and integrated care and all this sort of stuff for 25 years and almost nobody does it because it requires this monumental amount of sharing the power and breaking down of traditional organisational forms that almost nobody's willing to do."*

By 2025, Chorus had grown into a multi-service provider with over 700 staff and volunteers, serving thousands of customers across WA. To help unify practice across diverse teams, Chorus developed an internal 'Playbook.' Unlike a traditional policy manual, the Playbook was designed as a living document, co-created with staff. It contained guiding principles, examples of good practice, and frameworks for decision-making. As one Local Lead said:

> *"other sort of systems that have really helped is the online Chorus communities of practice so everyone could join that to build together how we do stuff (…) from that, it grew into the Playbook. So instead of kind of going, here's your policies, here's your procedures, we're together, through those communities of practice, creating a Playbook which is basically your processes and your procedures (…) and it reflects the way that we work together."*

This approach reinforced the philosophy that authority was distributed rather than concentrated. The Playbook was also updated continuously, reflecting the evolving practices of local teams.

An Emerging Identity

Chorus's distinctive approach drew attention both locally and nationally. In 2024, it received the AIM WA Pinnacle Award for People and Culture Excellence, in recognition of its co-designed approach to building a thriving and connected community. Academics and practitioners began to cite Chorus as an Australian example of a 'liberated company' or 'teal organisation', borrowing language from management literature on self-management and freedom-based leadership.

For some staff, this was exhilarating. They spoke of feeling trusted, respected, and able to grow in ways they had never experienced in hierarchical organisations. For others, it was challenging, even alienating. The question that began to surface more often in leadership forums was: *"What if this way of working doesn't suit everyone?"*

The Onion-Ring Model

Chorus depicted its operating model through an onion-ring model centred around local communities, with two-way arrows showing the interconnected nature of each layer (see **Exhibit 1**). The inner ring constituted the primary beneficiaries, customers, partners, and contributors to Chorus's impact in local communities. The image captured the idea that everything is connected through relationships and represented the core purpose of enabling local communities to thrive. The rings were described as follows:

Local Communities – The central point of value creation. Chorus existed to support people to live in their communities and to help those communities to thrive.

Locals and Enterprises – Small, autonomous and independent local teams of support workers, local partners and leads (typically 10–20 employees and volunteers); social enterprises who delivered services in partnership directly in local communities.

Enablers – with expertise in 'back office' functions such as human resources and finance, who supported, coached and guided local teams without making any decisions for them – and enabled Chorus to be scalable, effective, efficient, and compliant.

Leadership – Individuals who agreed to explicit leadership accountabilities who shaped, inspired and supported Chorus and its people. This included Local Leads, Enterprise Leads, Enabling Leads and Strategic Coaches / executives. Leadership team members had no additional decision-making rights than other organisational members.

Board of Directors – a group of Non-executive Directors who oversaw the performance, compliance and community impact of Chorus. The role of the Board was to set the strategic direction of the organisation. They monitored performance against the strategic plan and government contracts and were responsible for organisational governance.

In theory, each ring supported but did not control the one closer to the center. Authority radiated outward from the core, rather than inward from the top. In practice, this inversion created both empowerment and tension.

Locals and Hubs

At the heart of Chorus were the local teams, affectionately called 'Locals'. A typical Local consisted of 10–20 employees serving a specific community. Locals provided a wide range of services, from in-home assistance and gardening to community connection, disability support and mental health well-being programs.

Each Local operated as a highly autonomous team. Some members assumed leadership responsibilities within each team and all team members worked collaboratively to schedule service delivery of the work, handle customer relationships, and manage their collective budget. Locals were expected to recruit and onboard new team members, develop their own schedules and rosters, maintain compliance documentation, monitor service quality and performance against targets, and support each other's professional growth. A Local Lead described the experience:

> *"For the support worker team, it is that invitation to collaborate and to lead, and for what we call the hat roles, (…) local leads and customer partners, the empowerment there is to say, bring your style of leadership into the team, be constantly learning, really make this little micro enterprise that is the local, make it your own with your team. See what works for you, share what works great, learn from what wasn't quite so successful."*

'Clusters' of Local teams operating in a particular geographic region were organised into hubs. These hubs were groups of Local Leads and enablers who collaborated as a peer group to support

and challenge operational performance across the Locals in the hub. An additional hub (the Social Enterprise Hub) comprised all the teams working in enterprises and delivering services across the organisation. Hubs themselves had no formal authority, though hub members formed agreements with peers. Each hub consisted of about 4-6 local teams with 4 Hubs across metropolitan Perth and Southwest regional WA (in addition to the Social Enterprises Hub).

Accountability and Authority without Managers

Perhaps the most radical element of Chorus's model was its approach to accountability. In most organisations, accountability flowed upward; employees answered to managers, who answered to executives. At Chorus, accountability was defined as an agreement made between people which included undertakings about outcomes and/or behaviours, and an understanding of positive and negative consequences which may arise. Accountability was lateral and collective. Teams created agreements about how members would 'be' with one another (see **Exhibit 2**) guided by a Making Team Agreements Play within the Playbook. Individuals held role canvases (see **Exhibit 3**), that specified their commitments as well as the skills, mindsets, and attitudes of the various roles within the organisation. The Play 'Making Team Agreements' encouraged setting ground rules for agreement making discussions including using the Signature Behaviours (accountable, aspirational, customer focused, relational and kind) to guide the discussion. The discussion leading to the finalised Team Agreement was considered to be as important as the agreement itself due to its contribution to building shared understanding. The role canvases were co-designed by a selection of people in roles across the organisation using collaborative decision-making to determine the outputs. In the absence of a traditional performance management system, these Team Agreements and Role Canvases were used alongside transparent results dashboards to enable individual and collective accountability. Guidance for managing broken agreements was provided in the Chorus Playbook which included a 'managing broken agreements matrix' (see **Exhibit 4**).

If a staff member consistently failed to deliver, the team was expected to address it directly. In extreme cases, enabling leaders could be consulted to provide coaching and guidance, but the norm was peer-to-peer accountability. This was liberating for some—who enjoyed the trust—and confronting for others—who disliked challenging peers. As one Local Lead admitted :

> *"The agreement making that we have in place I think is really helping to support that and knowing for people to be educated about the way that they can challenge one another, but to do that in a respectful way and to know how that feels for other people within a set group."*

Chorus distinguished between authority and accountability. Authority was not a personal possession but a function of roles and described the formalised permission to make a decision, set a goal, create or change a Play, impose a sanction, or execute a transaction.

Chorus had a strong orientation towards collective and consent-based decision-making. The Chorus authority framework sought to balance:

- the need to maintain a licence to operate (regulation, compliance),
- the right of choice and control in communities and customers,

- Chorus's values and intent around relationships, empowerment, and collaborative decision-making.

The Chorus Playbook provided guidance about decision-making including the decision-making framework and the board delegation policy. The decision-making framework provided a set of guiding principles. It included 4 types of decisions based on the decision-making process (consent or advice) and the scope/impact (narrow or broad) (see **Exhibit 5**). It included step by step processes for decision-making and spelled out which forums considered which types of decisions. Dan, as CEO, technically retained veto authority but had never used it. This symbolic restraint reinforced the message that real authority was distributed which was highly valued as part of the Chorus culture. As one Enabling Lead said:

> *"we have our decision-making or our commitment forums and that that's really quite incredible because it means that you don't have somebody with a C in their title making the big decisions. It's actually the staff—and it's people that you know, the local level, the enabling level and our strategic coaches coming together to come up with the decisions, the big decisions for the organisation."*

The guiding principles in the decision-making framework gave Chorus people the confidence to make decisions affecting their work as one Local Lead expressed:

> *"I think it's more around people having that confidence that they can make that decision and not be judged or not be in trouble (...) and having all that information at your fingertips to enable you to make a decision is amazing."*

Enabling Functions: Partners, not Controllers

Traditional care organisations relied heavily on centralised support functions; HR approving hires, finance allocating budgets, IT dictating systems. At Chorus, the model was different. Enablers existed to support Locals and Enterprises, not to control them. For example, finance provided tools and dashboards so Locals could track their own budgets, HR (People and Culture) coached teams on recruitment but did not 'approve' candidates, and IT provided infrastructure but consulted Locals on what tools they needed. The principle was simple: Locals held accountability, and enabling functions existed to make their work easier.

This partnership model sometimes confused outsiders. Regulators expected HR policies, finance sign-offs, and compliance officers. At Chorus, much of that authority was distributed. Instead of a single compliance manager, Locals themselves took responsibility for audits—with support from enablers.

Decision-Making Forums

One of the most distinctive features of Chorus was its use of five commitment forums as the primary decision-making bodies, with clearly specified accountability and authority in each of the key domains aligned with the organisation's four commitments (customer, people, standards,

assets) – along with its strategy. Forums were composed of representatives from different parts of the organisation—Locals, enablers, enterprises, and leadership and anyone in the organisation could put forward a proposal to have a decision made by a forum. Forums were designed to operate by consent rather than command. Decisions were made not by majority vote, but by testing whether anyone had a 'paramount objection' or counter-proposal. If not, the proposal moved forward. This approach encouraged experimentation, reduced the need for perfect consensus and provided opportunities for personal growth and development.

For example, one Local Lead in expressing concerns about their ability to add value to discussions in the Assets Forum said:

> *"I thought, 'Oh my God, I don't know a thing about that. It's all about property and vehicles and this sort of thing'. Actually, it turned out I did and did have things to contribute (...). So, it is a really great way of building that confidence as well in team members."*

Forums gave Locals a voice in organisation-wide issues and reinforced the principle that authority was shared, not held at the top. But forums could also be slow, and not all participants were always fully satisfied with the final decision. As one participant admitted:

> *"Any change that happens comes from swarms, squads, forums, and people that are a part of Chorus are part of that decision-making process and part of the idea of putting that in place, right. So, you're more invested that you actually want to see it work, but equally if that's not reflective of what you felt you made a decision about, if it's not what you expect, that can make it even worse."*

Swarms and Squads

Beyond forums, Chorus used two other key mechanisms for collaboration, swarms and squads. Swarms were temporary groups formed to solve a specific problem or opportunity. They might last a few weeks or months, then dissolve. For example, a 'Local evolution swarm' drafted a framework to guide Locals in evolving their services and presented the draft framework for feedback in a R'PER meeting before finalising it in a Play. Squads were ongoing groups handling enabling tasks across the organisation. For example, a communications squad maintained internal newsletters and updates. Both swarms and squads operated without managers, and many were aligned with a particular forum. Members volunteered or were nominated by peers, and decisions were made collectively.

Tools for Transparency

Chorus invested in digital tools to support its model.

First, Peerdom, a dynamic, relational tool, mapped roles, accountabilities, and relationships across the organisation. Instead of a hierarchy chart, all staff could see a living network of roles through the Chorus intranet. **Exhibit 6** provides a screenshot of how work is organised structurally in Chorus.

Second, Trello boards tracked the progress of work being undertaken across the organisation in local teams, hubs, forums, squads and swarms and were accessible to all. The value of 'working visibly' was expressed by one Enabling Partner who said:

> *"We're all in touch with each other and we're all, you know, we've got a Trello board, and we follow all that as well, so we can see each other's work."*

This high visibility assisted with 'matching' people to work aligned to their interests, expertise, and development needs. The high levels of transparency were also critical to how leadership was practiced in Chorus.

Third, the Playbook provided cultural and procedural guidance, co-created through forums, squads and swarms and continuously updated.

Together, these tools ensured that information was transparent and accessible. Rather than ask a manager for permission, staff could consult Peerdom to see who held accountability, check Trello to track progress, or refer to the Playbook for principles. Transparency reduced reliance on authority, but it also required staff to engage actively with systems. For most, this was empowering. For others, it was overwhelming with some support workers questioning the relevance to their roles.

Strengths, Weaknesses and Tensions

The Chorus operating model offered clear advantages: staff felt trusted and respected, teams experimented with new practices, surveys showed high meaning and belonging, and the fewer levels of management reduced overhead costs. In customer feedback, many praised the responsiveness of Locals, who could adapt quickly without waiting for approval.

The model also created challenges; not all staff thrived without hierarchy with some wanting to be told what to do and others struggling to enact their leadership without resorting to authority. Different Locals interpreted practices differently, forums and consent processes could slow decision-making, and regulators struggled with distributed accountability. As one Local Lead said:

> *"A couple of team members, it's mostly the older ones, jokingly call me boss-ola (...) I could say whatever I wanted, and they would still come to me to ask approval for something"*

These tensions highlighted the paradox at the heart of Chorus; the freedom-based practices that empowered and motivated most employees could alienate others, and the very freedom that inspired innovation could generate compliance headaches.

Freedom-based Leadership Principles

In the operating model, leadership was not about command and control but about stewardship and relinquishing power. Leaders at Chorus, whether the strategic coaches, enabling or local leaders, or board members, were accountable for safeguarding purpose and values, creating conditions for Locals to thrive, connecting the organisation to external stakeholders, and holding space for difficult conversations. Their role was closer to coaching or facilitation than to managing. As Dan explained:

> *"If you want to go through a transformation like this or even join and work here you have to be able to give up a whole lot of shit that you used to think was really important. You've got to give up control, you've got to give up status, you've got to stop thinking you have all the answers. You've got to start valuing the much less technically informed voices. You've got to be willing just to have the conversation because there is no channel, there aren't directives being issued. You can't solve a problem by cracking heads together because you don't have the power to do it. So, all you're left with is showing up and having the conversation."*

Leadership was not confined to a few positions at the top. It was conceived as a shared capacity distributed across the organisation. While the model placed formal leaders in a supportive role without authority, the culture emphasised that everyone could exercise leadership in their own domain through the relationships they formed and cultivated and the accountability they took on. This represented a fundamental break from the traditional Australian care sector, where frontline staff were accustomed to managers making decisions, approving rosters, and handling compliance. As Dan put it:

> *"Accountability is something that people take on rather than are given. (...) I can think of three examples this week where a relatively less experienced person earlier in their career has been encouraged to take on a leadership accountability that they didn't think they could do and then the support is there, the training is there."*

Eight Principles of Freedom-Based Leadership

Chorus's operating model embodied eight principles of freedom-based leadership, which guided both formal leaders and frontline staff:

Empowerment – Trusting people to act with autonomy and take initiative without waiting for permission.

Respectful Relationships – Valuing everyone's voice, regardless of role or status.

Trusting Relationships – Assuming good intent, supporting peers through mistakes without blame.

Shared Vision – Aligning decisions and actions with the organisation's purpose of enabling local communities to thrive.

Accountability and Responsibility – Owning commitments and holding each other to them through agreements.

Humility – Acknowledging limits, listening deeply, being open to feedback.

Guardianship of Liberated Teams – Protecting the conditions for self-management and restraining from use of formal authority.

Shared Beliefs and Values – Living the R'PER values daily and weaving them into ways of working.

These principles were not aspirational posters on a wall; they were integrated into signature behaviours, plays, agreements, forums, and daily decision-making. Employees were encouraged to

ask: *"Am I empowering others? Am I building openness, transparency, and trust? Am I taking accountability?"*

Empowerment and Accountability

The principle most visible to employees was empowerment. Locals were encouraged to design their own workflows, experiment with new ideas, and make decisions without waiting for approval.

For example, a Local team in metropolitan Perth noticed that many of their elderly customers were socially isolated. Rather than request permission to start a program, they simply created a weekly 'tea and technology' group which brought together aged care customers and teens from a local high school to support older customers feel confident with their technology through a rich experience of sharing wisdom. Within weeks, participation grew, and customers reported increased confidence and connection. One Local Lead described the feeling:

> *"You turn from this person that is expecting somebody to tell you what to do, to go actually I can make that decision myself. That's an amazing way to work."*

Dan confirmed Chorus's commitment to empowerment and autonomy in expressing:

> *"The intent is for you know, very high levels of autonomy and people having a felt sense of very high levels in autonomy. I think it is something that we presently, it's evolving, (...). I would wager that even the least autonomous Chorus team has quite high levels of autonomy relative to other organisations."*

However, empowerment also created anxiety. Not everyone felt ready to take initiative without clear direction. Some new hires asked, '*But who is my boss?'* Others admitted they sometimes longed for someone to simply tell them what to do.

Empowerment was paired with the principle of accountability. At Chorus, this meant staff not only had freedom but also had to own the consequences of their decisions. Peer accountability was perhaps the hardest cultural shift. Confronting a colleague about missed commitments required courage. Some employees embraced it; others avoided difficult conversations, leading to frustration. Chorus had established Team Agreements and Role Canvases to help embed accountability and responsibility which one Local Lead noted as driving real change:

> *"I've really seen a shift in that since we brought the role canvases in, but equally I think within our Local we have a good sense of what we're accountable for and what we're responsible for individually to make the local run well (...). I've seen a real maturity in that since we've put those agreements in place, I'm not sure that that existed perhaps 12 months ago. So, there's been a maturing."*

Despite this maturing, challenges in holding each other to account persisted and active, respectful conversations about how to resolve this took place in one of the monthly R'PER meetings. In this meeting attendees explored what was getting in the way of upholding agreements, with some participants reporting challenges created by being accountable under multiple agreements. One

Enabling Partner articulated the tensions between holding each other to account and resisting a return to positional authority in expressing that:

> *"One of the challenges for us is how we hold people to account without going back to the old style of someone coming in and having a talk with that person and letting them know that they're not operating in the way that we like and it's incredibly difficult not to go back to those ways of operating particularly."*

Another enabling team member described a situation when one Local within a hub was not meeting its commitments:

> *"That's been a really interesting tension in the business because there's the element of how does that impact our outcomes as an organisation, and also how do we build the muscle within the hub that that Local is a part of to actually transparently discuss what the requirement is there that hasn't been fulfilled yet, and the fact that that is an accountability of that particular local to achieve that outcome."*

To reinforce accountability, forums often ended with explicit agreements, who would do what, by when, and how progress would be reviewed. The transparency tools (Trello boards and Peerdom) made commitments visible, reducing the temptation to avoid responsibility. Nothing was hidden; everything from budgets to decisions was visible. This transparency reduced politics; decisions were debated openly, and agreements were documented. But it also increased exposure; mistakes and missed commitments were visible to all. For some, this visibility was motivating; for others, it was intimidating.

Trusting and Respectful Relationships

Chorus leaders emphasised that trusting and respectful relationships were the glue that held the organisation together as Dan said:

> *"I think the entire fabric of our organisation is built on quality relationships. It's the double helix of our organisation I have no doubt."*

Another strategic coach reinforced Dan's point about the quality of relationships within Chorus in saying:

> *"There's something quite real about how people relate to each other, and I think it stems from how a support worker shows up in a customer's life right through to how a support worker relates to their peers and their Local, and how we are with each other across the organisation. I think it's not always polite, but I think it is always respectful (…) it means being real and it means being truthful and it means being authentic."*

Without managers enforcing compliance, staff had to trust each other's intentions and capabilities. Trust was cultivated in several ways: open access to information (financial data, meeting notes, decisions), transparent role mapping, and a culture of 'assume best intent' and avoid blame in feedback. As one Enabling Partner said:

> *"If somebody isn't sort of doing that, there isn't this whole like point and blame. It's more. Are you OK? What's going on?"*

This trust extended to customers too. Chorus encouraged Locals to co-create care plans with customers, rather than prescribe services. Trusting customers to articulate their needs aligned with the organisation's purpose of enabling people to live the life they choose. As one Local Lead said:

> *"We have had customers also be involved in the process, so it's not just a thing that's happening to them, but we have had that consultative thing where they've come in and actually, you know, workshopped on ideas as well."*

Another Local Lead shared the importance of trust within Locals in saying:

> *"I think there's been a lot of trust placed on everybody, but I think especially the Locals. We've been entrusted, I guess with a group of customers with a group of people to try and flourish and make a really great place to work and the trust that we've been given from what used to be the hierarchical has just made you really want to have those trusting relationships."*

Respect was not just a value but a daily practice. In forums, all voices were invited before decisions were made. In Locals, volunteers were treated with the same dignity as paid staff. In leadership, humility was expected; senior figures were coaches, not commanders. One Local Lead put it bluntly:

> *"We used to talk about "they" in the backroom making all the decisions, but "they" is all of us now."*

Respect was also critical for diversity. Chorus served communities across WA, including Indigenous peoples, migrants, and people with complex needs. Respecting cultural differences and individual preferences was embedded in training and practice and was reported by one Local Lead as unique in Chorus:

> *"I don't think I've ever really experienced such a large organisation to have that sense of everybody knowing each other and actually respecting each other and valuing what each different very unique person is bringing."*

Taken together, trust and respect created a sense of psychological safety; staff felt they could speak up, make mistakes, and be vulnerable without fear of punishment. This safety was reflected in WOW survey data, where scores for 'meaning at work and 'sense of belonging' were consistently high. For many staff, this was transformative. An employee with a disability noted:

> *"I just I don't know if I could ever work for a company with a hierarchy system again. They've allowed myself because I have a disability as well, to have the autonomy of working either from home or from the office."*

Despite successes, challenges persisted; some teams fully embraced the values where others clung to old habits, not everyone had the communication or facilitation skills needed for peer

accountability, freedom sometimes translated into blurred boundaries with staff taking on too much, and some directors struggled to reconcile cultural ideals with governance expectations.

Challenges to Sustainability

By 2025, Chorus had established itself as one of the most distinctive voices in Australia's care sector. Its onion-ring model, autonomous Locals, and freedom-based leadership principles set it apart from the hierarchical structures dominating the industry. Awards and recognition had validated its boldness. Staff surveys showed meaning, belonging, trust and autonomy at levels most providers envied.

Yet beneath these achievements lay a set of structural challenges that threatened the model's long-term sustainability. Some challenges came from within, as not all employees adapted easily to autonomy and other struggled with relinquishing power. Others came from outside, as regulators and funders demanded more conventional forms of accountability. Still others came from the board, whose composition and expectations shifted over time.

Adapting to New Ways of Working

The most immediate challenge lay in the people experience of autonomy. Some employees thrived. They spoke of feeling trusted, respected, and liberated from bureaucracy. They took initiative, created new services, and built stronger relationships with customers. Others struggled. Without a manager to provide direction, they felt anxious, without clear authority, they hesitated to act, without hierarchical mediation, they found peer accountability uncomfortable.

Patterns emerged: new employees often struggled most, especially those from hierarchical backgrounds, older employees sometimes found it difficult to 'unlearn' habits of reporting upward, and conflict-averse staff resisted peer accountability conversations. Training and coaching helped, but the interpersonal challenges of adapting to the new ways of working remained. As one new employee who had come from a hierarchical organisation and felt a bit lost in their first few weeks said:

> *"Be clear with what sort of responsibility. I'm not saying that you are only restricted with that responsibility, you are open to take more responsibility (…) but for a new person just be little bit more explicit about their role."*

Fit with the Outside World

While internal adaptation was one challenge, external fit was another. Chorus operated in highly regulated sectors, where compliance requirements were unforgiving. Regulators and funders expected clear accountability. Their logic was simple; if something went wrong, they wanted a manager to hold responsible. Chorus's answer, 'the team is accountable', sometimes failed to satisfy.

Examples included audit visits where inspectors asked, *"Tell us about your performance management system"* and staff responded, *"We don't have one, we're experimenting with peer reviews."* Inspectors struggled to relate this to systems they were familiar with. In another example, funding contracts requiring named 'responsible persons.' Chorus had to nominate individuals even though decisions were collective. Additionally reporting obligations sometimes demanded signatures from senior officers, Chorus complied, but the spirit of collective accountability was diluted and at times resisted by employees trying to stay true to Chorus's way of working as one Enabling Partner expressed:

> *"By taking a stand on the way in who we partner with also sends a message across the community at Chorus. It's like, actually, we're not going to work with these people in the community who are constantly saying they want to speak to our CFO or constantly saying "who's your boss"."*

This mismatch meant that Chorus constantly translated between its internal culture and external demands. It risked being misunderstood, penalised, or forced back toward hierarchy.

Dan further reflected on the complexities of the regulatory regime and the challenges of demonstrating compliance in an untraditional organisation:

> *"We have three different standards we have to comply with across the three different sectors that we follow, and we've been audited in all three of them this year and we have to demonstrate to these auditors that notwithstanding (...) we almost don't do anything that looks normal, but we still do demonstrate compliance and that's another one of those interfaces (with the outside world)."*

Board Alignment

The Board of Directors played a crucial role in stewarding Chorus's purpose and ensuring performance, risk and compliance aligned with industry expectations while leading the novel operating model. But directors, unsurprisingly, were highly tuned to the risks and challenges inherent in the freedom-based model. Most directors embraced the philosophy, seeing Chorus as a pioneer. Others questioned whether the model was sustainable over the long run, and one director voiced this concern:

> *"The focus is about trying to future proof the organisation trying to make the operation so intrinsically entwined around this way of working, this focus on community and connection, that it's really, really hard and really expensive to wind it back. So, there's a real economic rationalist approach from a board perspective to try and embed this idea so that it survives the loss of the board and the loss of the CEO."*

Board alignment was further challenged by external pressures. If a regulator criticised Chorus, or if an incident occurred, directors felt the weight of their fiduciary duties. With one director noting:

> *"The board gets nervous and reactive, if their kind of their responsibilities are seen to be at risk. So, safety is a big one. So, if it's proven, if there's evidence that this way of working is*

more unsafe, then that would be a risk. If there was evidence that this way of working was not as financially viable, then that would be at risk."

Their instinct was to ask for clearer controls, precisely the structures Chorus sought to avoid. This tension between governance and freedom raised the risk of creeping hierarchy. The board could unintentionally push the organisation back toward the very models it had rejected.

The Strategic Question

By mid-2025, the cumulative challenges were clear. Internally, not all staff adapted easily to self-management. Externally, regulators and funders demanded traditional accountability. And at the board, alignment with the model was uneven.

Chorus's challenges revealed the paradox of innovation in care; the very practices that empowered staff and communities created risks with regulators and funders. The very freedom that attracted some employees left others anxious. The very culture that inspired loyalty strained the board's tolerance for risk. The sustainability of Chorus's model depended on how it navigated these tensions. Could freedom be universal, or did sustainability require compromise?

Freedom for All?

It was nearly 2 p.m. when the R'PER leadership forum ended. Papers rustled, laptops clicked shut, and participants drifted toward the door. But Dan lingered, staring at the whiteboard covered in notes and agreements. One phrase, scrawled in thick marker, seemed to echo louder than the rest:

"This way of working might not suit everyone."

The words had been expressed by a board member and had been recognised by meeting attendees.

Over the years, Dan had grown used to defending Chorus's model, first to regulators, then to funders, and often to staff themselves. He could point to awards, survey data, business performance and customer testimonials as evidence that freedom-based leadership worked. Yet he could not ignore the stories of some employees who felt adrift, overwhelmed, or quietly disengaged.

For many, self-management was a revelation. They felt trusted, empowered, and capable of shaping their work in ways that aligned with their values with some expressing they *"could never go back to hierarchical ways of working"*. For others, the lack of hierarchy was unsettling. They wanted clarity, direction, and someone to make the hard calls, while others struggled to give up the traditional authority they had held. Beyond employees, there was the external world. Regulators continued to expect conventional accountability. Funders continued to ask for named managers. The board continued to wrestle with its own responsibilities.

Dan picked up his notebook and reread a line he had jotted earlier:

Does freedom really suit everyone?

The question was not academic. It pointed directly to a set of choices that could define Chorus's future:

Stay the Course? They could double down on freedom-based leadership. This required more coaching, more training, more cultural reinforcement. But they would do it with the belief that over time, most people would adapt, and the model would prove resilient.

Adapt the Model? They could introduce more structure for those who needed it: clearer roles, designated managers, perhaps hybrid teams. This could risks diluting the philosophy but could also create a system that accommodated a wider range of preferences.

Find a Middle Ground? They could preserve the principles of freedom while offering opt-in scaffolding: optional mentors, rotating coordinators, or tiered responsibility models. They could try to reconcile inclusivity with philosophy.

Each option carried risks. Staying the course could alienate some staff and strain compliance. Adapting the model could erode Chorus's identity and distinctiveness. Seeking a middle ground could confuse both staff and regulators, creating a muddle rather than clarity.

As he packed his bag, Dan knew the decision could not be deferred much longer. The future of Chorus, its values and purpose, and perhaps even the credibility of freedom-based leadership in Australia's care sector, rested on how the organisation answered the question now staring them in the face.

Discussion Questions

Proposed questions to frame classroom discussion:

- **Is it true that self-management and freedom-based leadership do not suit everyone?**
  - What evidence from Chorus supports this claim?
  - What evidence challenges it?
  - What evidence from other sources supports or challenges this claim?
- **How should Chorus balance inclusivity with philosophy?**
  - Is it fair or realistic to expect all employees to thrive in the same model?
  - Should organisational models adapt to people, or should people adapt to models?
- **What are the risks of doubling down on the current model (staying the course)?**
  - Consider regulatory fit, workforce turnover, and board alignment.
- **What are the risks of adapting or diluting the model?**
  - Would Chorus lose its distinctiveness and cultural advantage?
  - Could this compromise or undermine trust and empowerment?
- **If you were CEO Dan Minchin, what would you do?**
  - Stay the course? Adapt? Seek a middle ground?
  - What would success look like in three years?

These questions asked students to think not only about Chorus but also about broader lessons in leadership, organisational design, and the sustainability of self-management.

Exhibits

Exhibit 1 – The Onion-Ring Model

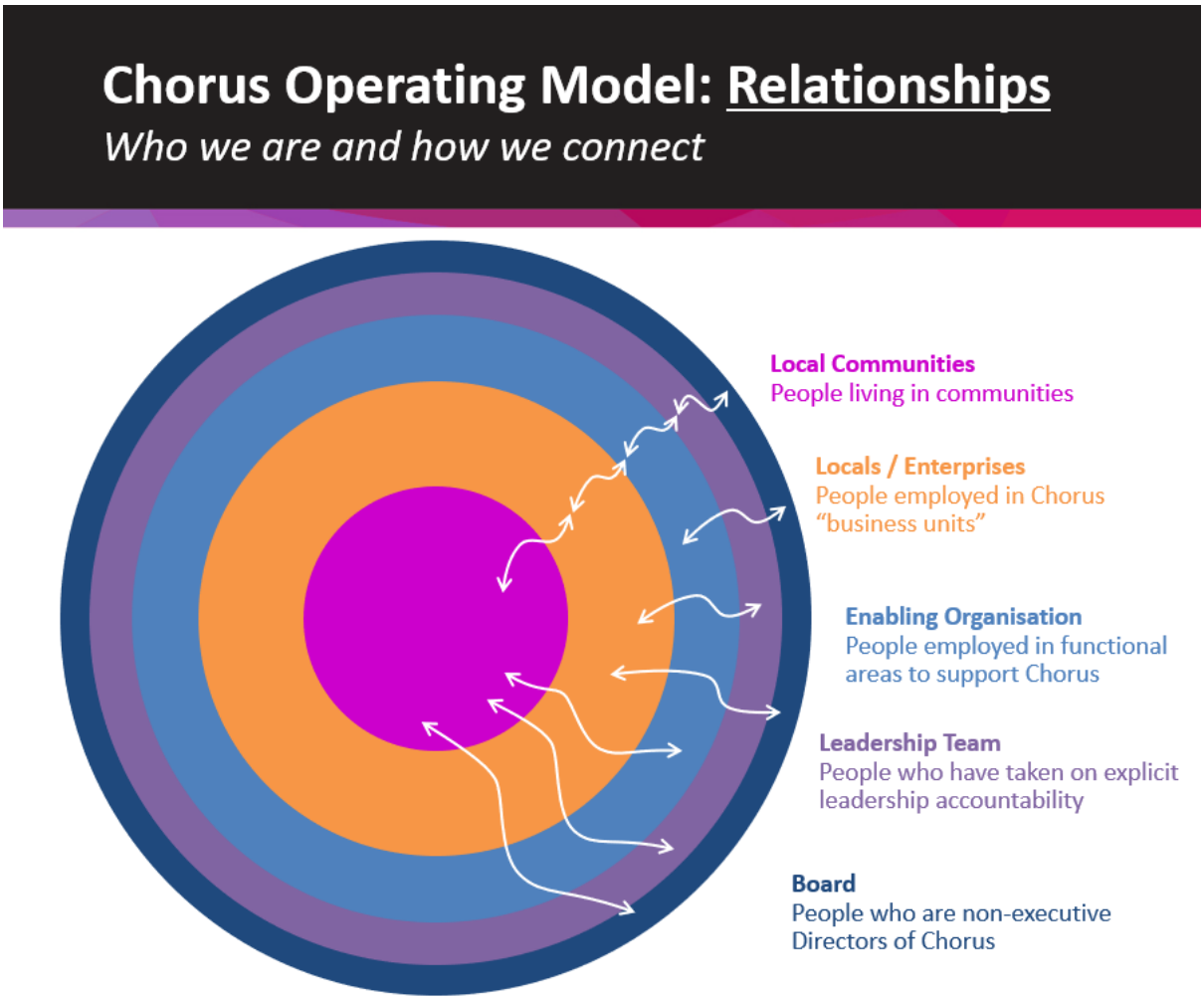


Exhibit 2 – Team Agreement Canvas

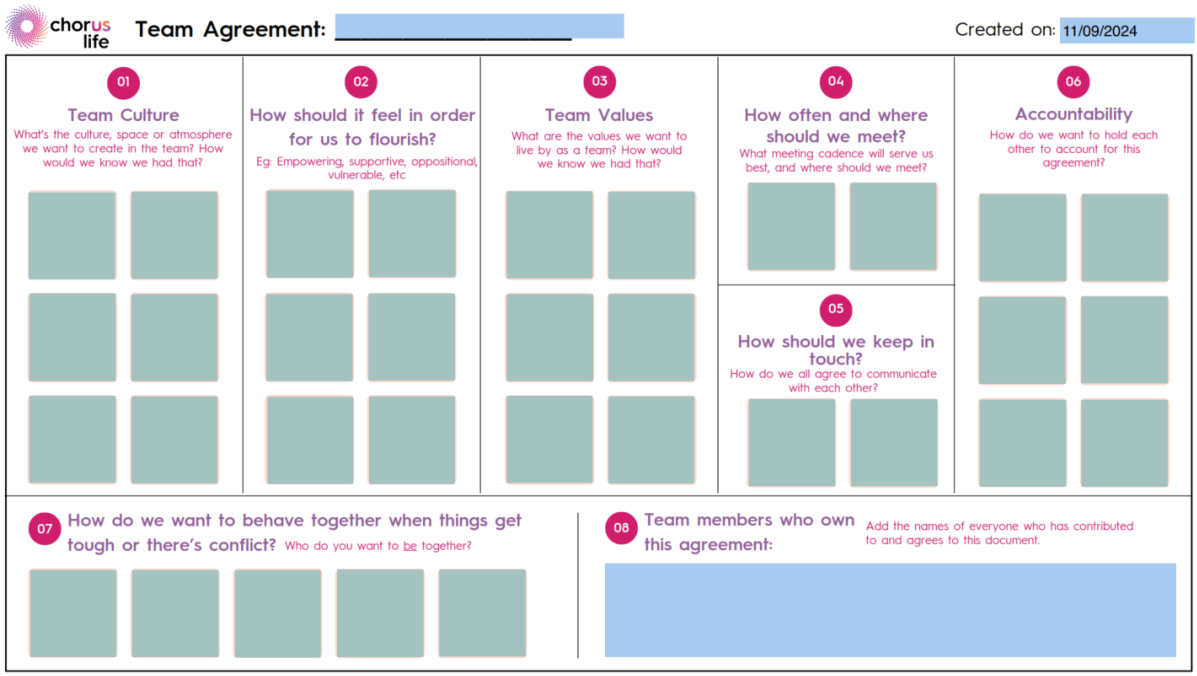
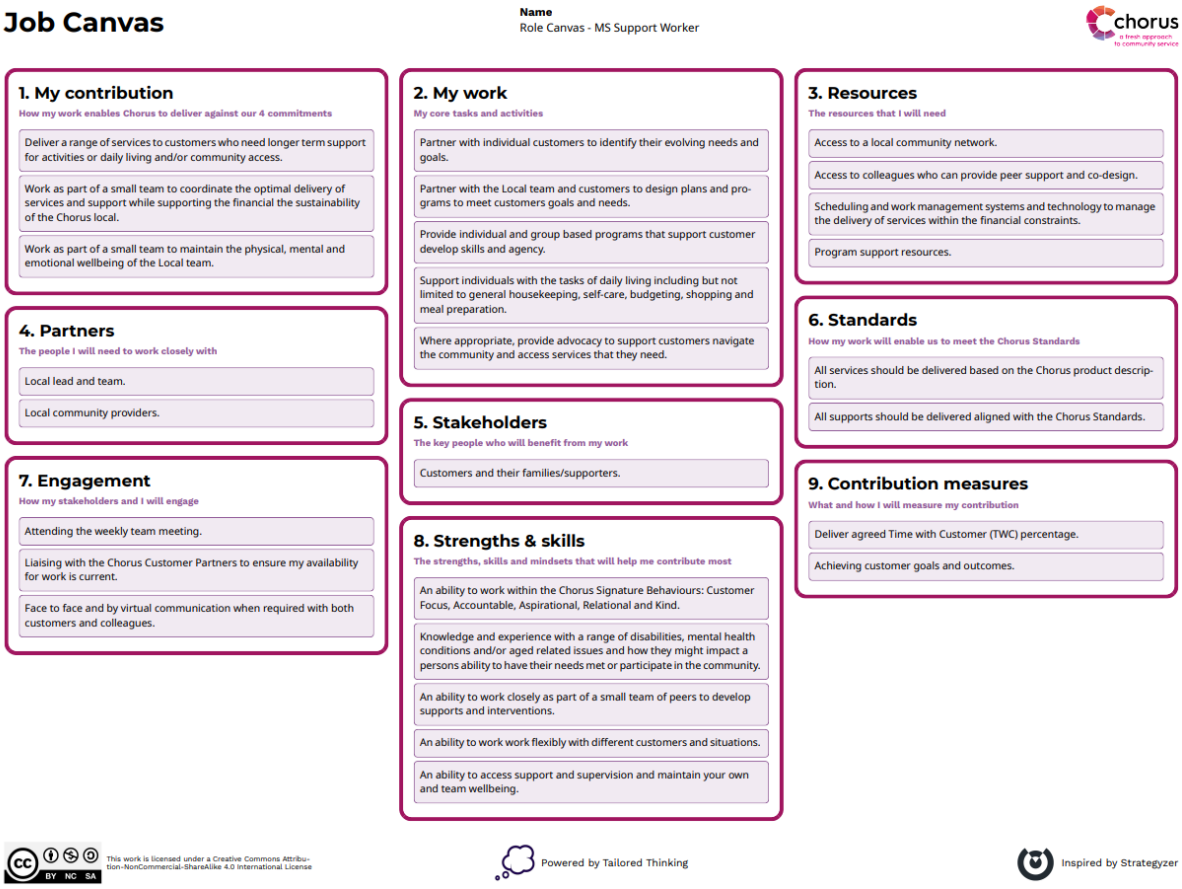


Exhibit 3 – Example Role Canvas



Job Canvas

Name
Role Canvas - MS Support Worker

chorus
a fresh approach to community service

1. My contribution
How my work enables Chorus to deliver against our 4 commitments

- Deliver a range of services to customers who need longer term support for activities or daily living and/or community access.
- Work as part of a small team to coordinate the optimal delivery of services and support while supporting the financial the sustainability of the Chorus local.
- Work as part of a small team to maintain the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of the Local team.

2. My work
My core tasks and activities

- Partner with individual customers to identify their evolving needs and goals.
- Partner with the Local team and customers to design plans and programs to meet customers goals and needs.
- Provide individual and group based programs that support customer develop skills and agency.
- Support individuals with the tasks of daily living including but not limited to general housekeeping, self-care, budgeting, shopping and meal preparation.
- Where appropriate, provide advocacy to support customers navigate the community and access services that they need.

3. Resources
The resources that I will need

- Access to a local community network.
- Access to colleagues who can provide peer support and co-design.
- Scheduling and work management systems and technology to manage the delivery of services within the financial constraints.
- Program support resources.

4. Partners
The people I will need to work closely with

- Local lead and team.
- Local community providers.

5. Stakeholders
The key people who will benefit from my work

- Customers and their families/supporters.

6. Standards
How my work will enable us to meet the Chorus Standards

- All services should be delivered based on the Chorus product description.
- All supports should be delivered aligned with the Chorus Standards.

7. Engagement
How my stakeholders and I will engage

- Attending the weekly team meeting.
- Liaising with the Chorus Customer Partners to ensure my availability for work is current.
- Face to face and by virtual communication when required with both customers and colleagues.

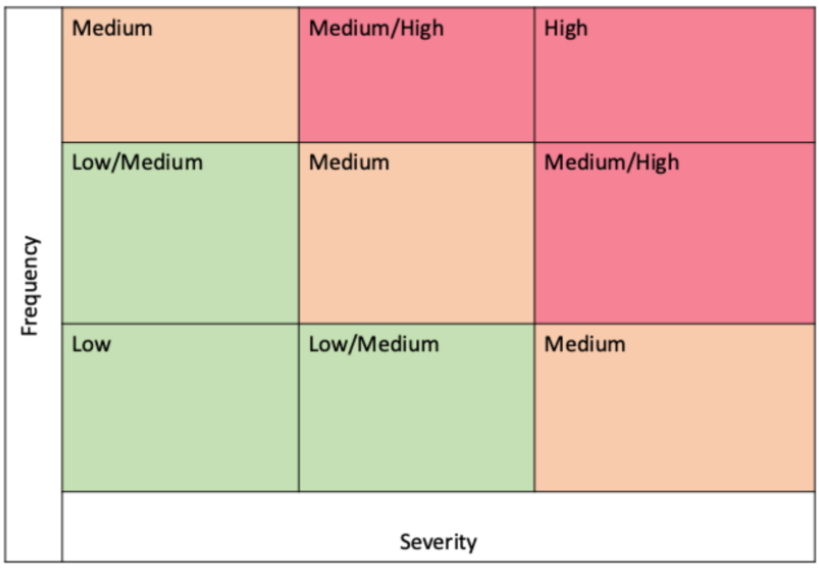
8. Strengths & skills
The strengths, skills and mindsets that will help me contribute most

- An ability to work within the Chorus Signature Behaviours: Customer Focus, Accountable, Aspirational, Relational and Kind.
- Knowledge and experience with a range of disabilities, mental health conditions and/or aged related issues and how they might impact a persons ability to have their needs met or participate in the community.
- An ability to work closely as part of a small team of peers to develop supports and interventions.
- An ability to work work flexibly with different customers and situations.
- An ability to access support and supervision and maintain your own and team wellbeing.

9. Contribution measures
What and how I will measure my contribution

- Deliver agreed Time with Customer (TWC) percentage.
- Achieving customer goals and outcomes.

Exhibit 4 – Managing Broken Agreements Matrix



Managing broken agreements:

Category 1: Green
Instruction, Learning and Support
This person:
- Is making beginner errors and requires good practice to be demonstrated and reinforced.

Category 2: Amber
Correction and improvement
This person:
- Is repeating mistakes and errors
- Is not following agreed Plays
- Consistently engaging in conduct that is misaligned with Chorus values
- Is not developing skills to support their role at a pace that would be considered reasonable.

Category 3: Red
Disciplinary action up to and including termination
This person:
- Has failed to deliver acceptable performance post a correction and improvement process.
- Has breached a significant agreement with serious consequences to customers or Chorus.

Exhibit 5 – Decision-making Matrix

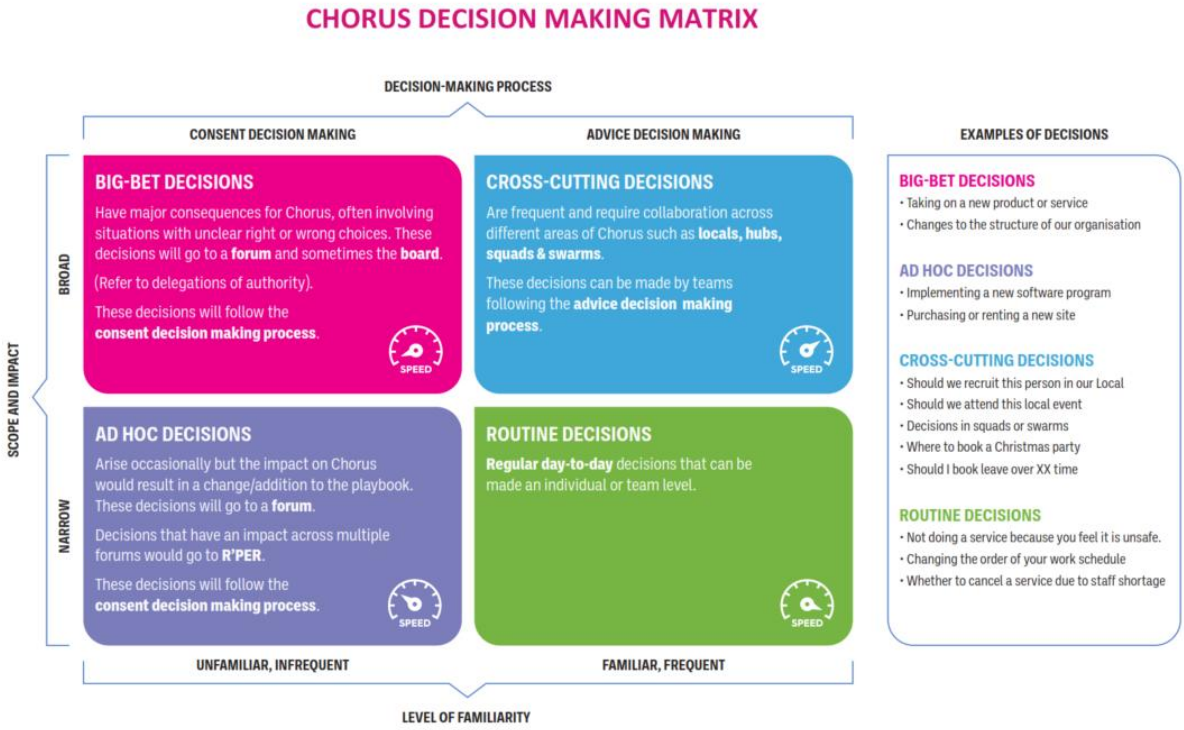
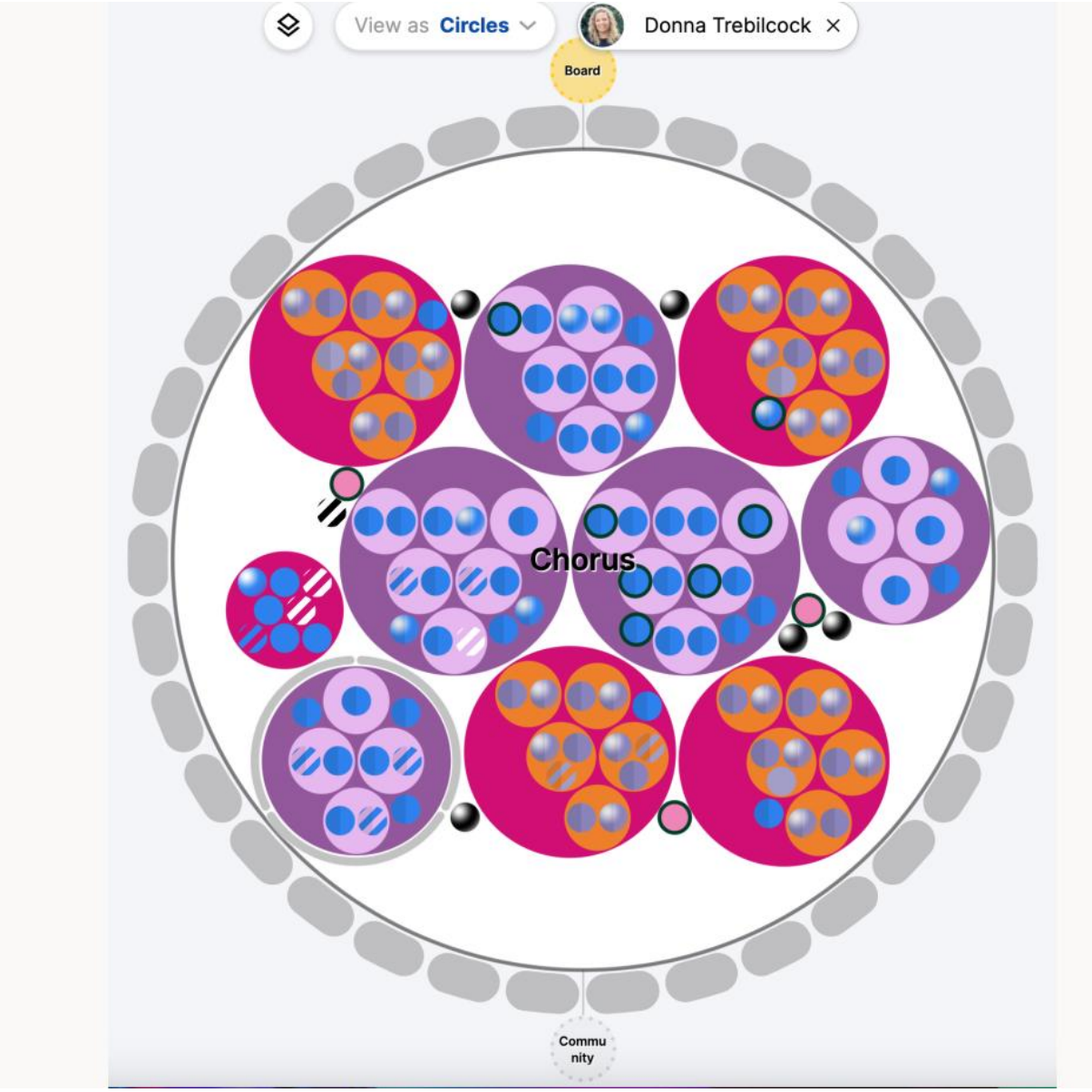


Exhibit 6 – How Work Is Organised Structurally



Output from Peerdom