

## Leadership: Some underlying processes

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### Question:

*I understand that recently there was a special course run on aspects of Māori leadership. I know that there is a lot of material on leadership in general but would like to know if we are developing more specific models for the Māori and Indigenous world. Are you able to overview the topics that were covered; and suggest how we might use them in practical situations?*

**Keywords:** cognitive psychology, cultural values; leadership; problem-solving; self-reflection

### Answer:

Leadership is a very relevant topic for Māori scholars and professionals. It is also very timely because it highlights the need to merge traditional knowledge about leadership with contemporary models to produce a model that is more applicable to Māori and Indigenous worlds.

In April of 2010, the Manu Ao Academy (a national inter-University programme for Māori academic and professional advancement (<http://www.manu-ao.ac.nz/>) in collaboration with Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga (one of New Zealand's eight centres of research excellence (<http://www.maramatanga.co.nz/>), ran the first course of a three-part series on leadership. It was hosted by the University of Auckland. The primary objective was to begin the course series with an overview of the main issues concerning leadership by Māori for Māori in academic, professional and community settings. There were 47 participants from both academia (all universities and wānanga of New Zealand were represented) and the professional world. The course was over two days and involved structured discussion and written assignments around keynote lectures and selected readings.

The programme included lectures by Justice Joe Williams whose address was entitled "Contemporary Māori leadership"; Dr Colin and Lena Cox, who provided helpful leadership exercises and profiling; and Dr Manuka Henare, who spoke on "Traditional Māori leadership". In addition, John Tamihere discussed "Socio-cultural relationships" in the real community space; and Dr Merata Kawharu spoke about community and iwi relationships from the perspective of a Māori woman academic. As expected, the content of these topics was wide-ranging. However, there were many points of convergence about the nature of leadership and the challenges ahead. I have selected some emergent themes and elaborate on them using perspectives from cognitive psychology to draw implications for goal-directed behaviour in the practice of leadership.

In his keynote lecture, Justice Joe Williams asked participants to consider what roles they should play in the present and in the future, along with the consequent responsibilities. He also emphasised what may be learned from the past. His description of the ancient achievements in sea-craft design and navigation highlighted the qualities and skills demonstrated by those leaders of ocean travel. These skills include defining the objective (where to go and why) and becoming very knowledgeable and skilled so that the actions lead to success. In Dr Manuka Henare's address, he used the term "landscape" to emphasise the importance of carefully choosing the environment and particular context for working in. The

metaphors of landscape and navigation are closely linked because while one represents the chosen area for endeavour, the other refers to defining and travelling along the course or pathway to successful achievement in that area.

I would like to develop these points along with others that arose, from the view of cognitive psychology and to model them in a way that may be applied not only to the role of leadership but more broadly to the notion of problem-solving (Williams, 2006). Leadership has much to do with solving problems. For example, if one can identify the problem, the needs, the constraints, the available resources and so forth, then a set of strategic decisions and actions can be applied to the situation. This problem-solving process can take place within an individual and it can also happen with a cohesive group. As noted by several speakers at the symposium, everyone is in a sense a leader and while this is obvious when one is acting in an individual context, the interactive social context adds another dimension. Nevertheless, in terms of how the mind works, there are some basic processes that cut across both individual and group situations.

In considering which “landscape” to work in (Henare) or which island to sail for (Williams) a key message is that where possible, choose the surrounding context for goal-directed activity with rationality and care. It should be a context or area that affords opportunities to make a contribution to solving problems and therefore to transformations. Caution is needed: (a) to choose areas where you already have or can develop the necessary skill sets to perform; (b) to be wary of taking on too many areas of endeavour; and (c) to seek rationality at all times.

Several speakers and participants also recognised the need for evaluating the ‘self’ as well as the surround, to help determine the opportunities for and feasibilities of potential contributions. I offer therefore, an initial framework for self-reflection drawn from an article by Sherman (1994) who wrote in the context of executive life in major companies in a fast-moving economy (Table 1). Although the focus of Sherman’s work was on executive life and leadership of very large American companies, I suggest that his list of seven goals is a useful framework for self-evaluation or due-diligence with respect to the fit between the problem, the landscape, the goal and the self.

**Table 1. Self-reflection goals**

Objectivity
Responsibility
Self-confidence
Tolerance of ambiguity
Learning
Balance
Action

As a goal, **objectivity** is a key part of self-reflection because it demands an uncluttered view of the realities of a situation as represented by information or data that are reliable and valid. The clarity of these processes emerge from a high level of objectivity that is not clouded by extraneous information. This goal reflects Williams’ navigation example where the sea captain has to focus on the data about guidance, safety and maintenance, without distraction from non-essential data. In problem-solving and leadership contexts, a high level of objectivity is usually necessary; and during self-reflection it is worthwhile evaluating oneself with respect to this goal.

The second goal in the list in Table 1 is to take **responsibility** for one's states of mind, for one's decisions, and for one's actions. To blame others or external conditions for failure is not a characteristic of a leader. Being able to accept and take responsibility is related to the third goal of **self-confidence**. This third goal is reflected in a readiness to accept challenges that have uncertainty and potential emotional effects, but with an approach that recognises one's own strengths as well as recognising a certain level of vulnerability through one's weaknesses. Being reflective about one's strengths, weaknesses and capabilities should generate a realistic and not a false sense of confidence. These two goals are linked to Henare's point about choosing the landscape. The decision includes being realistic about taking on a set of tasks and in having the abilities to carry them out and indeed to keep adding value.

The fourth goal in Table 1 is a **tolerance of ambiguity**. Just as recognising one's own attributes and characteristics is a kind of tolerance exercise related to self-confidence, there is the need to be able to tolerate a certain amount of ambiguity in real situations. Through thinking and introspection, one should be able to discern ambiguities, dualities and paradoxes because often that is the reality that needs to be understood and accepted. Successful introspection should facilitate that understanding. Dr Kawharu's discussion about being a Māori woman academic surrounded by non-Māori ones links to this goal. She also mentioned another aspect of duality, which is working as a staff member of a university as well as working for local iwi, and being evaluated in different ways. As Dr Colin Cox pointed out, there can be overlaps and ambiguities between leading and management; and while this led to attempts to distinguish them in practice in the past, he notes that there is now more acceptance in combining the roles where feasible.

The role of **learning** is a continuous one, both for individuals and groups. Reflection and evaluation of the experiences of the self and of the group can be a rich source of knowledge for developing best practice at both individual and group levels. A focus on shared exploring, inquiring and learning facilitates open discussion and healthy exchange. Learning to become an enhancer of such exchange is a worthy goal. John Tamihere's address highlighted the learning process that occurs at the community level where whānau, hapū and iwi interact with community trusts and with local and government agencies. At the same time, Tamihere's talk illustrated the need to be objective and realistic, as well as the need to tolerate differences and to take on the responsibility of getting on with the job.

Achieving a suitable **balance** in life is the fifth goal of self-reflection. For example, the demands of work and the needs of one's family, as well as the needs of the inner self can become imbalanced and in conflict. Attaining and maintaining a balance requires introspection to recognise the causes of imbalance and to form priorities so that balance and well-being are enhanced. This goal also emerged during the wānanga discussions where participants raised questions about coping with multiple responsibilities. It was fully recognised that Māori leaders have always had to work effectively in two worlds. For example, in the past from the early days of European settlement, to the early decades of the 1900s with the superb examples of Sir Apirana Ngata and Sir Peter Buck. That challenge for balance between the two worlds is an additional one.

The remaining goal of successful self-reflection in Table 1 is **action**. However, before it occurs there are pre-requisite stages. For example through introspection, one can see that a certain path of action is needed to solve a problem; that is a recognition process. The next stage is to be motivated to take that path. So one thinks "...Oh yes, I am very keen to do that". However, that motivational state needs further impetus to become an intention, such as "...Yes, now I am going to do that, and this is how I will do it". This sequence of 'recognition-motivation-intention' however, does not necessarily lead to action because the path can become stalled at the intention stage. The triggering of intention into action requires

the application of 'will'. The act of 'willing' is the impulse that turns intention into action. It is the last part of the decision process and it triggers the output or action phase.

Self-examination with respect to these decision-making processes that lead to action and of course to the nature, values and quality of those actions, is valuable because it enables people to adapt when certain pathways require it. In the words of Sherman "The goal is for people to direct their destinies, embodying their values in action every day" (Sherman, 1994, p. 8). Apart from some discussion on techniques for leading and managing organisations to achieve outcomes (Cox) the wānanga did not spend time on discussing the action phases I have raised here. The participants were all clearly motivated and were keen to learn more about the pathways to leadership. Focus on the action phases will probably be discussed more specifically later in the course series.

In considering Sherman's list further in the light of the discussions during the leadership wānanga, it is clear that while it provides a useful framework for self-reflection, it should be expanded to include at least the idea of cultural values and virtues. The important role of cultural values and virtues was emphasised by Manuka Henare and certainly accepted by all participants. While much has been written about values such as *tikanga*, *manaakitanga*, *kaitiakitanga*, and *kotahitanga* among others, the recent work by Linda Smith (2006, p. 12) and Fiona Cram (2009, p. 314) provide particular insights on how such values are needed to shape and guide the conduct of researchers in the community. Their list also includes cultural virtues such as "Titiro, whakarongo... korero" which is looking listening and understanding when one should speak; "Kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata" (do not trample on the dignity of a person); 'Kia tupato' (being cautious, astute and reflective); and "Kia mahaki" (be humble). Clearly, these virtues also relate to leadership behaviour as does another key virtue in their list. This is "Aroha ki te tangata" which is to love and respect people.

It is noteworthy that in his opening address for the wānanga, Professor Charles Royal emphasised that a particular over-arching virtue is aroha. He also explained that it is a virtue with the potential to extend from those closest to you out to humanity, to nature and to life itself; and that it should be pervasive in our endeavours and indeed in our very existence. It seems essential therefore, that for self-reflection and introspection as a researcher and as a leader, the list from Sherman's work must be accompanied by a list of cultural values and virtues such as those provided by Manuka Henare, Linda Smith, Fiona Cram and other Māori scholars, with aroha as an over-arching principle.

I have focused on selected emergent themes from the first of a series of leadership wānanga organised by the Manu Ao Academy in collaboration with Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, and used perspectives from cognitive psychology to offer further implications for leadership behaviour and practice. The following suggestions appear to be warranted:

- 1) Know where to go by evaluating and choosing the landscape or context for your involvement. This means evaluating and analysing the area so that you understand the key parts of its structure, how they relate to each other and what objectives allow you the scope for making a contribution.
- 2) Learn to distinguish between the variables that matter and those that do not. Part of the process of building leadership skills involves analysing the self through introspection; which should assist in judging where you can best make a contribution and what other abilities you should develop.
- 3) Be quite objective; take responsibility for your actions; develop a healthy balance in your life and work; understand ambiguities; and keep on learning.

- 4) Cultural values and virtues and in particular aroha, should be pervasive and certainly part of any model of self-reflection.

## References

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## Author Notes

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