

# Māori women perspectives of leadership and wellbeing

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He hōnore,  
He kōroria ki te ātua,  
He maungarongo ki te whenua  
He whakāro pai ki ngā tangata kātoa  
E kui mā, e koro mā, e rau rāngatira mā  
Tēnā kōutou kātoa.  
Ko Stacey Ruru tōku ingōa, nō Ngāti Haua me Ngāti Raukawa ahau.

I am a graduate from the University of Waikato and have completed a Masters of Applied Psychology in Organizational Psychology. I decided to pursue a Masters in psychology to register as a psychologist and to build on my passion for Māori research. I also enjoy Kyokushin-kai and being involved in the Nawton Community.

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## Introduction

This article is a summary of my Master's thesis with a primary focus on the findings. My research sought to understand how Māori women in leadership roles maintain their *waiaora* (wellbeing) to stay strong. 'Leader' or 'leadership' from a te ao Māori perspective refers to rāngatira which is the *mana* (power) and *tapū* (sacredness) of a leader and how that leader portrays those attributes within leadership (Walker, 2006; Wihongi, 2010). Māori women leaders such as Dame Whina Cooper, who led the *bikoi* (land march) in 1975 for Māori land rights, and Te Puea Herangi, who established the *kingitanga* (king movement) (Wihongi, 2010; Wirihana, 2012) showed *mana wahine* (the ability to practise and share mātauranga or mana). They both led change and are an example for future generations to follow (Pihama, 2001; Te Awekotuku, 1991). While the values of traditional Māori leadership such as weaving people together, *tikanga* Māori and *whakapapa* continue to be practiced in contemporary Māori society (Henry & Pringle, 1996; Mahuika, 1992; Walker, 2006) there is growing research that specifically focus on Māori women as leaders but not the importance of wellbeing within Māori leadership. This research aims to fill that void.

This research followed a qualitative kaupapa Māori framework using values such as *kānohi kitea* (greeting face to face) and *ako* Māori (learning, teaching, reciprocity). (Pihama, Cram, & Walker, 2002; Russell, 2008; Smith, 1997) to gather the leadership journeys of five Māori women leaders from academic or chief executive

backgrounds across Aotearoa. The interviews were analyzed by thematic analysis to generate codes from raw data and led to the identification of eight main themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bricki & Green, 2007; Coolican, 2014; Flick, 2009). These themes were further explored by five *whakataukī Māori* (Māori proverbs) to delve within the layers of each theme. Whakataukī are Māori proverbs that detail mātauranga and *tikanga* (customs) within te ao Māori (Le Grice, 2014; McNeill, 2009; Wirihana, 2012). Each whakataukī will be presented in the findings of this article and link to quotes from each participant to emphasize their leadership stories.

## Findings

*Kāore te kumara e kōrero mō tōna reka: The kumara does not speak of its sweetness.*

Each participant shared stories about hūmarie that discussed the influence of others. Hūmarie translates to humility and has been associated with whakaiti, whakahihi and whakamā.

Te Rina comments on maintaining a balance between hūmarie:

*One of the things for me. . . you need to be careful, because your strengths can also be your weaknesses. . . You can have confidence, but your confidence can also be arrogance. . . I've just got really comfortable in my own skin. (Te Rina, Chief Executive)*

Te Rina discusses the importance of *kia tūpato* (to be careful) within leadership contexts, as individual attitudes or actions can influence others. The ‘*kumara*’ is a metaphor for humility within *te ao Māori* and was described by participants as a leadership quality to maintain.

*Ēhara tāku toa i te takitini, he toa takitahi: My success would not be bestowed onto me alone, as it was not individual success but success of a collective.*

This *whakataukī* captures the ability to work together as a team or group to accomplish something great as a collective. It also refers to sharing achievement with other people rather than self-advancement.

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Aroha shared a narrative about a Māori leader she admired:

*She won't ever say that she's done anything individually. It's always a collective. . . you find actually across Māori women – Māori in general. . . we tend not to act individually. (Aroha, Chief Executive)*

Aroha shared this story as an example to aspire to be within her own leadership role and it links to *mana wahine*, because this story empowered Aroha to share it with others. In relation to Māori leadership, it is evident that collectivism is important to relationships and trust.

*Pātua i te taniwha o te whakamā: Don't let shyness overcome you.*

This *whakataukī* refers to a *taniwha* who is a guardian within *te ao Māori*. The *taniwha* symbolises a challenge or opportunity to develop knowledge and

character. In this context the enemy refers to the individual's strengths and weaknesses to overcome challenges.

A dimension of this *whakataukī* questions what the *taniwha* represents for these leaders. Katarina identified the *taniwha* and the impact it has on her experiences as a leader:

*When I'm the only Māori . . . the only woman on committees. . . it's largely white men – old white men too. . . not usually direct challenges. . . although I have had one . . . the veiled language that they use. . . the ways in which they'll try. . . to consciously. . . more unconsciously. . . marginalise. . . you just have to figure out what's the strategy for this. . . You can't be . . . calling people out . . . directly. . . that. . . becomes counterproductive . . . I'll just do a direct consultation, just call them out directly for their kind of racism which I've done with a few senior people, and other times there has to be a more subtle approach. (Katarina, Academic)*

Katarina describes an experience that many women face within the workplace or on committees. The *taniwha* in this context is about how Katarina faced those challenges and highlights the importance of speaking up for your rights, but the importance of finding strategies to neutralise any situation.

*Pātua te taniwha o te whakamā* was a *whakataukī* that described how participants faced and overcame challenges. The outcome of facing challenges resulted in growth, strength and resilience for Māori women.

*Piki kau ake te whakāro pai, haubake tōnu iho: When a good thought springs up, it is harvested, a good idea should be used immediately.*

This *whakataukī* refers to using ideas as an opportunity to develop

a pathway for future generations. Participants shared stories of sharing knowledge and being influenced by *tamariki* (children) or *taura* (students) that they worked with.

The *tūakana-teina* mentoring relationship was discussed by Aroha with reference to *tāmariki*:

*Encouraging kids to use their muscles, their mental muscles in a way that they might not have otherwise. It's never really a fair exchange where . . . they think they're getting advice from me. . . I actually get a huge amount of energy from them. . . you can see a real light in them. (Aroha, Chief Executive)*

As Aroha was the *tuakana* (eldest) her role is to guide the next generation of leaders, who are the *teina* (youngest). Boundaries were not set between the leader and *tamariki*; rather, space was created for knowledge and trust. Significantly *tuakana-teina* represented ‘*piki kau ake te whakāro pai*’ and is a leadership quality that participants discussed in their narratives.

He *ōranga ngākau*, he *pikinga waiora*: Positive feelings in your heart will enhance your sense of self-worth.

This *whakataukī* refers to emotional, spiritual and family *waiora* dimensions of an individual and the importance of maintaining balance.

Te Rina discusses finding a balance between the *hinengaro* and *tinana*:

*I realised in my 40s that. . . physical activity didn't quieten my mind to have clarity of focus, the physical activity wasn't doing that, you need a balance between those two things. They suggested that I do yoga or Pilates, I really resisted it. I went away with a friend of mine to a wellness place, they did like stretching in the morning and Tai Chi, and I*

*suddenly realised it wasn't natural for me to meditate. I felt really good after I did it, my head just felt really clear. (Te Rina, Chief Executive)*

Te Rina described her experience of achieving balance and that physical activities maintained wellbeing to an extent, but did not offer peace of mind. Being encouraged by others to maintain wellbeing was a significant finding because change was initiated and resulted in growth. Overall whakataukī provided a lens that explored what leadership and wellbeing meant to Māori women leaders. Stories about learning from others, being humble and participating in activities that balanced waiora were significant to the leaders within this study.

*Each participant shared stories about hūmarie that discussed the influence of others. Hūmarie translates to humility and has been associated with whakaiti, whakahihi and whakamā.*

## Conclusion

This research primarily found that Māori women leaders integrated leadership and wellbeing to balance their lifestyle. Leadership ability and wellbeing practices developed over time for Māori women leaders that made them resilient to change and challenges. Practices such as being connected to others, participating in meditation or sharing mātauranga were central to work and life balance. Significantly the use of whakataukī provided a greater understanding of the themes and the importance of being connected to others adding depth to the leadership journeys by Māori women leaders. Overall the leadership and wellbeing practices found in this study such as mana, mātauranga and ako Māori can potentially contribute towards leadership development or mentoring for future generations to follow. Finally, practices such as overcoming boundaries or being humble within leadership should be considered opportunities to develop rather than boundaries.

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