Māori women perspectives of leadership and wellbeing

Stacey Mariu Ruru

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.

Stacey Ruru was awarded the Karahipi Tumuaki -President’s Scholarship in 2015.

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 waiora (wellbeing) to stay strong. ‘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 hikoi (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, whakahīhi 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.

Katarina faced those challenges and said, “I realise 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...”

This whakataukī captures the ability to work together as a team or group to accomplish something great as a collective. It refers to emotional, spiritual and family waiora dimensions of an individual and the importance of maintaining balance.

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 waihine, 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.

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 participants faced and overcame challenges. The outcome of facing challenges resulted in growth, strength and resilience for Māori women.

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)

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

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, whakabibi 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.

References


