

Learning about project management from people and nature

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The Te Whaiti School Board is not a project management consultancy but teaches current and future project managers important lessons from a distinctly Maori perspective. A Living Systems framework for leading projects, can have its roots in tradition and push its growth into innovative heights.

Confronted with a problem-school threatened with imminent closure, members of this community deep in the Ureweras had responded in a way that resonated with Maori and ecological values. The achievement of the principal and trustees in turning the school around from an educational disaster to the top of its class, was widely acknowledged. Television New Zealand even produced a report when the entire school came out to lend their support to the Americas Cup challengers. "Team New Zealand has to overcome big obstacles. Just like us," said a school pupil (no name given) who was interviewed on Princess Wharf in Auckland. "And we have overcome ours. So that means, they can too!" Back in Te Whaiti, the school principal Genevieve Doherty explained that key had been for the pupils and the community to overcome something that had appeared difficult to them. "That generates confidence. And success breeds more success."

This approach to working together and resolving problems was distilled into an empowering framework for action. The story and the framework it inspired - Tipu Ake ki te Ora, "Growing ever upwards towards wellbeing" (www.tipuake.org.nz), set the theme for a two-day workshop led by Peter Goldsbury on applying project management lore in community development. The experience of a community organizing itself caught the interest of this qualified engineer and part-time AUT tutor who had specialised in collaborative project management. The story offered a rich repertoire for learning and teaching about project management. And as an old pupil of this school - he himself had grown up as a Pakeha member of this rainforest community - Peter could re-enter this familiar world bringing the respect it deserved.

The story draws its inspiration from the determination of its principal actors to lead change. Project management has developed its tools and terminology in the worlds of engineering and business, among other. But Te Whaiti demonstrated that it is not the language but the intent that matters. This strength can be traced back to the resolve held by the people involved. In a school video, Trevor Mallard is properly received to the school re-opening with a powhiri. Later, the Minister for Education comments on the school merger having been achieved by local people who themselves had decided how this school should be run. Or, as the former school board chairman explained to an AUT Media student interviewer: "I suppose we formed a circle, that's sort of how we did it."

A school is like other community projects which may be concerned with public health, vulnerable groups, or other social issues of shared concern. But real life is nothing like one would imagine a business initiative or an engineering project to be, where surely one can count on more predictable processes with better resources and above all more control. By reminding participants that organisational life in any setting is full of unreal assumptions and outdated

simplifications, Peter Goldsbury from the outset tried to turn attention away from constraints that cannot be overcome, to focus on the essential. The Tipu Ake model encourages a team to turn inwards and concentrate on what can be achieved by harmonising individual motivation and efforts.

By embracing a project philosophy that grew out of an image of roots, trunk and branches – Putake, Tinana, Pua – it was only natural that ideas of kaitiakitanga, that is a sense of guardianship grew into an articulated relationship with the Whirinaki forest in which the school was set. The website www.kaitiakitanga.net shows how this relationship has given fresh meaning to this Maori concept not only by stimulating education projects but by creating networks of mutual support.

In a well-practiced manner, the veteran training consultant framed group discussion with diagrams and thought experiments drawn from a wide project management literature that he made digestible and applicable with the Tipu Ake model. The integral values of sharing and reflection also animated group discussion. To stimulate involvement, the participants elaborated imagined projects for Raglan and Great Barrier Island. Given the setting, a hypothetical proposal for a *mataitai* on the shores of the island, that is a locally managed marine park, provided an opportunity to act out roles that might be present in that particular community. Using a Tipu Ake framework to look beyond the obvious motivations of self-interest and institutional mandates, it was not too difficult to find other values held by the respective actors that aligned with different categories of the model. From that, it became possible to see pathways to creating a coherent momentum that could unite different factions in and around the community to rally behind a *mataitai* project.

Once such a pathway opens up, much work will remain to be done. The project management thinking reviewed in the workshop introduced different tools to organise groups, prioritise work and grow leadership. What would otherwise be an overwhelming list of powerful resources, was made much more approachable with a living systems metaphor. Its strength comes out of the meanings and arrangements it can give to elements present in a situation and the choices of solutions that a group can be confronted with. For a student of social change like myself, the workshop let me bring along my own ideas, put them to the test and walk away with new ways of thinking about the life cycle of social change projects in a world of living systems.

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