

Clues to being an effective community leader

Reflections associated with how Kahurangi (Dame) Tariana Turia demonstrated leadership

Context

Many talk or write about leadership. Once in a generation there are a few who demonstrate it. Kahurangi Tariana was an inspirational and effective leader. Kahurangi Tariana showed us how to lead.

Some former and current members of the EGL National Leadership Group (NEGL) were privileged to work closely with Kahurangi Tariana for a time. This is a brief summary of what was extracted from some of the ideas, approaches and practices demonstrated by Kahurangi Tariana. NEGL notes that the following is not necessarily what Kahurangi Tariana said. The following are some interpretations, or 'lessons', that were recognised or reinforced when interacting and observing Kahurangi Tariana. NEGL provides this as both a challenge and guide to community leaders.

Some clues to effective leadership

- 1. Show not tell**
- 2. Create spaces**
- 3. Expect bravery**
- 4. Trust people**
- 5. Provide protection**
- 6. Explore the “and” not the “or”**
- 7. Look for partners everywhere**
- 8. If you don't like it then change it**

Show not tell

If you have been invited to speak for 30 minutes on the value of hearing multiple perspectives then speak for 5 minutes and then pass the microphone on to as many people as you can for the remaining 25 minutes.

Rather than speaking on how people/communities can find their own solutions – find people/communities some resources, encourage them to dream, challenge them to 'do' and then celebrate and promote their success with others.

Don't talk about partnership. Act as a partner whether that is welcomed or not.

Be a leader!

Create spaces

Everyone is a leader. All people, families and communities have the potential to achieve. To bring about positive and tangible action many just need a safe and honourable space to explore, test and do what they know they need or want to do. Creating spaces for people and communities to explore – try – learn – adjust can build self-sustaining momentum.

As leaders, we don't need the answers for individuals, families and communities. As leaders, we just need to provide/find/build the space, support and resource for people to restore and realise their self-determination.

As leaders, we often will need to learn how to 'get out of the way' when people begin to make positive change.

Expect bravery

If as leaders we treat people as dependent, helpless, lost or voiceless – then they may become these things. If we expect vision and bravery then there is a real chance this is what we will experience. Learned helplessness is learned! Competence and bravery can also be learned.

Growing as a leader often requires bravery and resilience. Growing as a leader requires both being 'moved by the people' – but also growing a thick skin. Leadership can feel scary. Leadership can be isolating. Leadership involves taking risks. Community leadership may not suit everyone. However, there are many people up to the challenge or learning how to be brave. Sometimes, we don't know how to be brave until it is expected of us.

Trust people

In this context we are referring to having the belief in people's abilities. Different people have had access to different experiences and different opportunities. Sometimes people need to be exposed to new information and ways of doing things. However, believing people can be trusted to identify what they need and that people want to build good lives is a foundation of leading positive change.

As leaders we can build trust and demonstrate trust by doing things like:

- Doing what we say we are going to do
- Showing people who we are. Our strengths, our gaps and our vulnerabilities.
- Developing long-term thinking and commitments
- Being honest about how we see things and being open to changing our minds and actions (trying different ways)
- Being tenacious advocates for people and positive change

Provide protection

Sometimes as leaders we need to be brave and encourage others to be brave. Doing things differently, trying new things without knowing what actual results will occur, communicating your opinion and being bold enough to trust can unsettle some people. Leading change can, by definition, threaten what is (the status quo). At times leaders will be misunderstood, misrepresented or attacked. This is not an aberration. This is what happens when we explore how to do things in a different and better way.

As leaders it is good to know that to be challenged is potentially a great sign. It can be evidence that people are exploring things they may not have chosen to explore or do. Building safe and supportive places where leaders know that they can 'put their guard down' and spaces where leaders know that others 'have their backs' is desirable. Some leaders have learned how to protect and nurture themselves. However, many leaders highly value trusted allies and safe spaces.

Explore the “and” not the “or”

Effective leadership can often require leaders to explore the fact that there are multiple parallel truths. Not only do different people see the same thing differently – but, sometimes there is a dance between two or more things that are equally important. Leaders attempt to balance these things and/or weave them together. For example, self-determination is important and so is interdependence. Personal vision is important and so is valuing the collective. Effective leaders tend to acknowledge the 'mystery' of things and not attempt to only pursue one singular concept at the exclusion of other important considerations. Exploring the “and”, not the “or”, can assist in creating the humility required of a leader when they discover there are multiple valid perspectives and many places for us to develop better ways of doing things.

Look for partners everywhere

Effective leaders look for who, what and how to achieve their goals. They seek to build understanding and allies. Sometimes support can come from people and places previously believed to be 'enemies' of change. Forming relationships with an optimistic expectation can reveal previously hidden allies and insights.

If you don't like it then change it

Over periods of time people build ways of seeing things and doing things. Sometimes these beliefs turn into widely held ideas, institutions and become 'how we do things'. Leaders who create change recognise that these ways of seeing things and doing things are not inevitable nor might they meet people's needs (they may, or may not, have in the past). Leaders are often required to explore what could be, imaging new and different ways and testing whether this works better for people.

Rather than being focussed on 'what was', 'what is' or 'what isn't' leaders are often called to explore 'what could be'.

This is a brief reflection of some of Kahurangi Tariana's legacy to us. As a community we can demonstrate effective leadership and grow the EGL movement despite the challenges we are currently facing.