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Maori Business: Lessons from the whale watchers

A bunch of businesses are benefitting from having tikanga Māori principles at their core. By Katherine Ryan

When the Human Rights Commission (HRC) sought to discover what makes some businesses successful and employees happy to work there, more than 3000 employers and employees across 16 regions of the country had their say. The feedback for the National Conversation about Work, the HRC's largest ever work-based project, highlighted the benefits that business can derive from taking a tikanga Māori approach.

Such a business model incorporates tikanga principles, which can be loosely translated to mean 'the right way of doing things' or 'the Māori way' of doing things. Tikanga, a set of protocols and procedures, stems from the word 'tika', meaning correct and right.

In his book *Tikanga Māori: Living by Māori Values*, Hirini Moko Mead says it involves "moral judgements about appropriate ways of behaving and acting in everyday life".

Relating this to the business world encompasses an importance on building relationships, connecting individuals to the wider group, the connection of people to the history of the rohe (region), valuing the wisdom and knowledge of older generations, looking after the environment and wildlife, working now for the benefit of future generations, and maintaining traditions. It also acknowledges the time it takes to do these things.

As everyday life changes, so too does tikanga. Mavis Mullins, of Dannevirke-based fourth-generation shearing business Paewai Mullins Shearing, says tikanga is not "stuck in concrete", but rather "evolves with the people, with each generation". Mullins, whose company featured in the National Conversation about Work project, says tikanga has to maintain "a fair amount of relevance".

A tikanga business model is holistic and includes variables such as the community and sustainability.

This is the case at Whale Watch Kaikoura, which has a commitment to the environment and focuses on the benefits to the community. Founded in 1987 by a group of local Kaikoura families, the company is still run by locals and its majority shareholding remains locally held. "The community and Whale Watch are one and the same," says chief operating officer Kauahi Ngapora. "What benefits us, benefits the community. What benefits the community, benefits us."

"... It merges back to that connection Māori have with the environment and sustainability. We have them both to lose if we don't look after what we have here. If there are no whales, no dolphins, there's no Whale Watch."

Community and the environment are stipulated in Whale Watch's business plan, with a strategic goal to financially empower the company to achieve their wawata – aspirations, hopes, dreams and desires. It's about "doing the things we want to do rather than the things we have to do", as Ngapora puts it. The company's core values – the five Cs of company, customer, community, conservation and culture – underpin how the business operates and are based on the modernisation of traditional philosophies.

Ngapora sees valuing and respecting customers as manaakitanga – hospitality, or the "Māori version of customer service". How to treat people – making them feel welcome and taking care of their needs – is another aspect of tikanga. A modernised version of this for Whale Watch is recognising that customers are now more aware of the environment. They expect companies operating out of nature to be doing things the 'right way', with a view to sustainability and environmental consciousness, says Ngapora.

One of the benefits for Whale Watch of integrating Māori cultural values with business practice is the point of difference it gives them, particularly as the majority of their customers are overseas visitors to New Zealand.

These visitors can form a lasting impression of the country as a whole from their experiences with Whale Watch from every aspect ranging from the logo to personal contact.

The company logo tells the story of Paikea and Tohora and the journey on the back of a whale from his old land to a new life and prosperity. The names of the vessels are culturally significant, each with the tā moko (design element), and guests are welcomed on board with a short mihi. Ngapora says the experience is a blend of their Māori cultural identity (and things they would do anyway) and being conscious of the general 'Kiwi' culture.

Crucial to the concept of tikanga are whanaungatanga (relationships, family connection) and manaakitanga. The National Conversation found Māori-owned businesses saw these concepts as crucial to their work environment. Mavis Mullins believes focusing on people ultimately leads to enhanced productivity – the bottom line is taken care of as an adjunct. "Pride in your work, turning up for work, being valued in work are not tangible assets to a company, but they pay off in productivity," she says. "The company has maintained market share, during a time when shearing numbers have been declining for up to 10 years."

Tikanga at work means being interested in employees as individuals, not as a commodity. Outside interests and responsibilities are valued, as they contribute to the person and then to the company. "It's that whole investment in human capital, which isn't always that easy to capture or measure," says Mullins.

She adds that the benefits to the shearing business can not always be explained with numbers. "Someone could say to us, 'show us how, show us where'. But when you look at the bigger sector, the bigger industry... it tells us we are doing something very, very right."

If the shearing company takes on 10 young people, invests in their training and only two stay on to become qualification holders that is a success. "If we can help two of those people to capture personal confidence and some transferable skills, then everybody has benefitted from it. It's not about 10 out of 10; it's about anything out of anything," she laughs.

Mullins says the main aspect of tikanga in their business is that new employees are taken in to the family and become whānau. "You turn up at our home and we're sitting down to a meal, then you're invited to sit down and have a meal with us, whether it's a roast dinner or a tin of baked beans."

Translating tikanga into tangible business success at Whale Watch has been a little more apparent through the international recognition it has gained over the past two years.

In November 2009, the company won the Virgin Holiday Responsible Tourism award, in London, and in May 2010 the Tourism for Tomorrow award for community benefit, in Beijing. Being put on the international stage gives great exposure to the business and Kaikoura and creates pride in the staff and locals. "We're a small-to medium-sized company in a little town and we take it out to the world," says Ngapora.

The connection of whānau, whakapapa and rohe is translated in Wakatū Incorporated's Associated Director's Scheme. The Nelson-based Māori-owned business collective aims to grow the next generation of governance through whakapapa and encourage young blood into the boardroom.

Shareholders and whānau are given the opportunity to gain experience in the governance of Wakatū Incorporation,

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with a view to becoming nominees for future board elections.

Associate director Kerensa Johnston says all decisions made are consistent with whānau values, history and culture. "It's always about looking backwards, to where we began and where we come from, with a view to looking forwards and being consistent with those values and ideals that our ancestors had," she says.

Like Whale Watch, kaitiakitanga (guardianship) is a strong aspect of tikanga for Wakatū Inc – "making sure we are effective and responsible kaitiaki – guardians – of our resources".

Wakatū Inc head office is currently engaged in the carboNZero programme and has achieved level one of the accreditation process. "So we are making sure we're doing things to put those principles into practice," says Johnston.

The complexity of Wakatū's seven businesses means it is important for future directors to be equipped with the necessary commercial skills and understanding of the history and peoples of Te Tau Ihu. By supporting upcoming board members, Wakatū is planning for the future.

Johnston says the opportunity for associate directors to work with board members, some of whom have been there for 20 to 30 years, is invaluable.

"It's a very gentle succession process," she says. "Other commercial entities can be quite cut and thrust and competitive, in not just governance but management as well. At Wakatū, there's a real willingness from the current leadership to create opportunities for the younger generation."

The connection between generations and sharing experience is also evident in Whakatū Marae's Wonderful Wāhine programme. The youth-to-work programme aims to keep young Māori girls at school longer and encourage them to connect with tertiary education, training or employment.

The programme is run in conjunction with Nelson's Nayland College and has an annual intake of around 30. The participants learn from the experiences of their kuia as well as listening to other young role models, building new relationships and checking out career opportunities.

The basis of tikanga here is to strengthen and build capacity in the younger generation. As a result of the programme, participants find they have better social interaction with peers, whānau and the community. The participants stay in school longer and have better relationships with teachers, counsellors and the school.

While tikanga is a Māori concept, putting values and standards into a business is not culturally specific. "Values are not owned by any one people or one group of people," says Mullins. "They're owned by us all."

Ngapora echoes this idea. "It's not just Māori culture. It's the company culture and the Kiwi culture. It's trying to merge all those things into a more modern type of framework." M

Tune up your tikanga

The Māori businesses highlighted in the National Conversation about Work project are willing to share their good practices with other organisations interested in exploring the tikanga model.

For more information and contact details go to www.neon.org.nz/nationalconversationaboutwork/

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