
Māori Women on Boards

*Report from the 'He Wāhine Pūmanawa' Māori Women's Leadership Workshop
Organised by the Ministry of Women's Affairs
4 June 2009*

Introduction

Context of report

This report outlines themes and ideas discussed by participants at the 'He Wāhine Pūmanawa' Māori Women's Leadership Workshop, organised by the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MWA).

Workshop participants included current Māori women directors, potential Māori women directors, and MWA staff. Participants discussed the issue of how to increase the number of Māori women on boards in the public and private sectors. Ideas from this discussion are set out in this report.

In addition, attendees at the workshop discussed practical advice for current and potential women directors, such as how to get on a board, planning a career in governance, and how to be an effective director. This advice is contained in the attached *Advice for Women Directors* document.

The workshop was organised in response to evidence indicating that, while Māori women are excelling in many areas (e.g. politics, business ownership), they are absent from many New Zealand boardrooms. MWA estimates that Māori women held 7.2 percent of roles on state sector boards and committees as of December 2007. In the private sector, the top one hundred companies on the NZX have only 8.7 percent women on their boards. It is not known how many of these women identify as Māori; however it may be as few as none.

Māori women on boards – points of difference

Māori women directors, like all competent directors, bring a mix of skills and experience that enable them to govern well and make good decisions. However, there are particular qualities that Māori women bring to a board that amount to 'points of difference'. These can include:

- intergenerational focus and long-term strategic thinking
- personal commitment to the organisation
- vested interest in the success of the industry and the communities, shareholders, and stakeholders that it supports
- links to large, sometimes forgotten or 'invisible' sectors of the economy – in 2005/06, the total value of Māori-owned commercial assets was estimated to be worth \$16.5 billion
- experience with values-based organisations.

Increasing the number of Māori women on boards

Collective action

As part of the Māori Women's Leadership Workshop, the attendees discussed collective action to increase the number of Māori women on boards. This was a short discussion and mention was made of the need for further kōrero (discussion) on this issue. Listed below are participants' preliminary suggestions.

Practical ideas for collective action

Collectively, Māori women could create:

- a strategy for targeting private sector boards, including steps like targeting a particular board, assessing suitable candidates for it, and promoting them
- a Māori women's leadership forum (potentially located online) that provides opportunities to collaborate
- a website with information and networking opportunities, which is modern and regularly updated
- a handbook for becoming a board director
- a series of workshops for current and future directors
- a marketing forum for Māori women's talent that emphasises the edge/point of difference Māori women have
- a brand for 'Māori women directors' as a group.

Focus issues for collective action

Developing a message

A clear, cohesive, evidence-based message about the benefits of Māori women is necessary for change. This message could emphasise:

- the way Māori women directors can combine best practices from Te Ao Māori (the Māori world) and Te Ao Pākehā
- the value of assets Māori women are currently managing and in what sectors.

To provide evidence for this message, research will need to occur on the number of Māori women on boards and the benefits they bring.

Understanding the system

To influence the system of board appointments, Māori women need to:

- know what boards are out there
- identify the 'gate keepers' and what they are looking for
- challenge the dynamic for appointing board roles and advocate for a more transparent process
- be active in their community and build relationships with community leaders around the country (e.g. mayors and local councils)
- know Ministers of the Crown and lobby across political parties
- increase the visibility of Māori women – especially those who live out of Wellington
- become more politically aware and understand the dynamics of board appointments.

Working for the future

To increase the number of Māori women in director roles, a collective could:

- be at significant events to get into the decision-making spaces
- create strategies and targets for the public and private sectors
- create new spaces for Māori women directors, in order to bring in the Māori women who aren't engaging in the traditional forums
- engage in succession planning.

To get young women on a career path for governance, Māori women could:

- normalise governance as a choice for young women
- get young people involved (e.g. YMCA leaders forum)
- advocate for including governance skills in the school curriculum
- encourage a 'board member for a day' programme to engage people's interest.

How experienced Māori women directors can help emerging Māori women directors

Participants expressed an interest in helping emerging Māori women directors gain access to board roles. Several strategies to achieve this were suggested:

- make a project of talented individuals and help them up the ladder by mentoring them
- women who are already on boards can recommend others; compile a list of talented women you can recommend whenever you are asked
- encourage commercial management experience – advise others on what they need to develop
- identify institutions that are looking for young people to start their leadership journey and recommend young Māori women.

Advice for Women Directors

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Considering being a director?

A director needs:

A successful director needs generic governance and strategy skills, with expertise in one or more specialties (e.g. iwi relationship skills). Traits of a successful director include confidence, commitment to the board, and the ability to say 'no'.

While training in governance and experience on boards is important, governance is not a career-path by itself. Directors also need experience in a range of organisations and roles, particularly managerial roles.

Before applying to a board or deciding to become a director

Questions to ask yourself

Do you want to be part of this board or organisation?

Before accepting a position on a board it is important to find out about the board's current performance and its chair. A strong, functioning board can further your development and improve your reputation, while a poorly functioning board can harm your reputation. Realise that a board can attract publicity.

What can you contribute to the board – how will you add value?

It is important to have passion for the company or industry, and to have something that you want to achieve through your role. However, don't turn something down just because you are not a specialist in the area (e.g. energy); other people will be. It may be your other skills they are after. And you can always up skill/learn.

Will you develop, and be challenged to learn?

Each board position should teach you something and improve your skills. Be selective and committed to what you choose; don't 'float' in a board that isn't going anywhere or adding to your development.

Do you have the time to commit to this role?

You may need to do a lot of work outside of the boardroom – reading papers, meeting with staff prior to meetings, and doing background research. Being a board director is a serious responsibility (which has risks attached). It is important to be committed to the organisation.

Can you afford to be a board member?

Many roles are voluntary or low-paid, but do not be hesitant to go for the higher-paid roles as well. For most board directors, governance roles alone are not a living and they continue to hold a 'day job'. Even if you receive many offers at one time, fashions will change in the 'desirable skill set' and you may not receive as many a few years later.

What are you willing to give up for this role?

You may need to give things up to join a board, including other roles that may have a conflict of interest with the board. Being a director also takes time and this may mean you need to reduce your work, family or community involvement. However, director roles do bring their own benefits – governance gives you an opportunity to learn from people you admire, and for them to learn from you. 'Nāu te rourou, nāku te rourou, ka ora te iwi' (With your contribution, and with my contribution, the stakeholders will flourish).

How to get on a board

Things you should know

Getting on a board is all about who you know (networks), who you are (reputation), and what you can do (skills).

The first governance role is the hardest/most important to get – it will create more opportunities for future roles. However, as your experience and reputation grow you are likely to receive more offers. It is always important to be discerning about the roles you accept.

For some people, starting a governance 'career' is not a conscious decision. You may see a need to engage with a board to tackle an issue or a crisis. You may be recommended to join a board by a mentor or friend. You may not even know what governance is when you're on your first board.

Lobbying to get yourself on a board is not a good tactic. Shoulder tapping (other people recommending you) happens when you have a strong reputation and good contacts.

Be aware you will be rebuffed often and don't take it personally – keep developing your talents and getting experience. When you do get a role, you won't always know how or why you were appointed.

Things you can do to improve your chance of being appointed

Networks

- Be on databases like the Ministry of Women's Affairs' Nominations Service database and the CCMAU database.
- Network for the right reasons – it is about reciprocity and forming real relationships.
- Network with analysts who recommend board appointments (public and private).
- Go outside your comfort zone to make contact with people.

- Join organisations like the Institute of Directors in New Zealand, Business New Zealand and local Chambers of Commerce.

Reputation

- Manage your reputation as it is your most important asset.
- Take control of your 'brand'.
- Think long-term.
- Membership of the Institute of Directors in New Zealand can increase your reputation as it shows you are committed to governance roles.

Skills

- Experience is one of the most important factors for appointments – look at your CV and work out where your gaps are.
- Engage in training e.g. Institute of Directors in New Zealand governance courses (course fees can sometimes be covered by others e.g. charitable trusts).
- Coaching and mentoring can improve your confidence and give you guidance – approach those you respect and ask them to mentor you.

How to be an effective director

Strategies for good governance

Outside the boardroom

- Network with staff/management to know what's happening on the shop floor – but be aware that this may not always be a popular strategy with other board members.
- Think strategically and pick your moment.
- Find out what the shareholders/stakeholders want; you are running the company/organisation for them.
- Be organised.
- Make sure you get a good induction when you join a Board e.g. that you get to meet the senior management and hear from them about their part of the business.
- Figure out what questions to ask to get the knowledge you need from management, in order to make good decisions.
- Have (or grow) a thick skin.

At the board table

- Ask questions until you are satisfied.
- If you have relevant experience, speak up; if you don't have the experience, listen and learn.
- Be known to stand for something (makes you strong and credible).
- Provide solutions when you have an issue.
- Have clear objectives for your influence on the board and work towards them.
- Articulate issues well.
- Pay attention to the details.

- Perseverance is important, but weigh the costs to you.
- It is important to speak when you have something to say.
- Don't make a decision too early – consider the views of other board members.
- Do claim the expertise you have at the board table – this brings respect.
- If you change your mind on an issue, you should say it – this shows integrity.
- You can pick up different styles of behaviour from your mentors, and apply these different styles as needed in the board room.

Influencing the rest of the board

Relationships

Relationships between board members are the most important factor to utilise when you are trying to influence the rest of the board. Take responsibility for making connections with others to help them understand your point of view. When you know people well you can anticipate their response to any issue. The chair's behaviour will affect everything, so work on forming a strong relationship with him/her.

Leadership is about taking people on a journey with you, and strong relationships are a big part of this. Focus on bringing diverse people together to get support for your idea, as it will be destructive to create factions. Boards containing whānau connections can be difficult to work with; the different challenges they present may require you to use different strategies to deal with them. This in itself is a strength, and these skills can be applied to other boards.

Board discussions do not begin in the meeting room; be aware that other conversations will be happening outside of the scheduled meetings, and try to keep yourself 'in the loop' through your relationships. This is also an effective technique you can use yourself – sound other directors out on your ideas before the meeting and gain support. Choose your forum, as some things are better said outside the boardroom i.e. giving other directors feedback.

Practical suggestions for relationship-building include:

- Find things in common with other board members and build on these.
- Make an effort to see board members in a social context as well as at meetings.
- Suggest a mihimihi session at the beginning of each meeting to catch up with people from last meeting. This can relax people and make a constructive beginning.
- Look for a difficult person's strengths and acknowledge them.
- Treat everyone with respect at all times, even when disagreeing with their opinions.
- Make your own assessments of board members – don't be influenced by others' opinions.

Your behaviour

Your behaviour in and out of the boardroom will determine your effectiveness and reputation as a director. Take your time and don't react instinctively – think about what type of person you want to be known as in the future. Be aware of underlying dynamics and reasons for others' decisions.

Establish your credibility in a forum, and then get 'pushy'. Pick your battles, but when you believe in your idea, trust in your opinions and put them forward.

Procedure is an effective tool for bringing discussions back to the point or forcing decisions to be made in a proper way. In the reverse, stepping outside the process can sometimes be a good way to get your point across. For example, a board was deciding on its three main issues through a process where each member nominated their own top three issues from a list. One item on this list was 'Māori issues'. A Māori woman director on this board described how, instead of just ranking 'Māori issues' at the top of her list (and realising that she would be the only one to do so), she changed the rules by saying: 'Māori issues are *always* relevant and key, they should not even be a part of the exercise'.

It is important to disagree in a manner that keeps your relationships intact. One way is to emphasise the good of all when disagreeing, as this can leave all directors' mana intact. Ask questions; this can get other directors thinking without them feeling threatened. This can be a helpful technique when you already know the answer.

Stick up for others when you agree with them, or when you disagree with the way they are being spoken to – this can lead to others speaking up for you and can create a change in the board's dynamics and its ideas of what is acceptable behaviour.

Other things to consider

Improving your own performance

Treat each board as an opportunity to improve your own performance. If you worry about your performance on a board then take the time to learn and grow. Ask for feedback from the chair or senior board members. Don't give up and leave the board straight away.

Throughout your governance career it is important to keep active and learn new ideas. It is helpful to find people to mentor you and improve your performance, and as your experience increases you may wish to mentor others.

When it's time to leave the board

Having a goal for your contribution can help you to stay focused when it gets difficult. It can also help you know when to move on and let someone else make their contribution. When you do leave a board, move on emotionally and mentally and don't stress about what happens once you have left. This is more difficult for iwi boards as you will always be connected (through non-board relationships).

You may wish to stay in contact with former board members in order to maintain your networks.

Risk management

A board director role can make you liable for the decisions of the company. It is essential to know when to step away for your own risk management. If you are not comfortable with the direction the board is taking, particularly in a financial or legal sense, you might need to declare your concerns and reservations, so that they can be minuted. In more serious cases, you may need to resign from the board. In a similar way, it is important to be aware of conflicts of interest and manage these transparently.