

The 5 Wai's of Māori Engagement

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After I started working at Treasury, I was asked to present staff with tips on how to engage effectively with Māori, including Iwi. I know there is an issue here - otherwise people wouldn't be asking me for help. Moreover, after 15 plus years in the public sector, even though we all live in Aotearoa NZ, I am used to working with people who know absolutely nothing about Māori.

The good news is people want advice. Based on my experience, which is not inconsiderable, here are my thoughts. So first of all a caveat: I'm not a "tōhunga" (expert). I don't have a communications or marketing degree. I am a doer more than a theoretician. On the other hand, I've been engaging with Māori ever since I was born.

I'm totally comfortable on the marae, and in the kāuta (cook house) - ok, I am more adept with a spud peeler and tea towel than a butcher knife- but, you get what I am saying. You see, growing up, my Dad was a key speaker on the paepae (where the speakers sit on the marae). We grew up at the pā, first at Tokorangi marae, in the Rangitikei/Halcombe area, where Mum is from, and later on the various marae up on the East Coast when Dad was a Cop there. The old man would drive us around to hui where he was needed. We would hang out with the cuddies, playing bullrush, and hide and seek. We would also waiata, haka and hongi as required. Without even knowing, I would be observing our kaumātua and kuia, learning from their example. These childhood experiences taught me a lot about how our people operate 'back home'.

But I'm also familiar with how Māori roll in town. Besides the fact that I've pretty much lived in cities all my adult life, I've visited countless Māori organisations and city based marae that are more urban than traditional. For example, such groups are more likely to do the low key whakatau (or simple Māori greeting) versus the full-on haka pōhiri (with the wero and all the trimmings). They are also less embedded in a traditional whakapapa connectedness paradigm, and more focused on a contemporary pan-Māori model of connection. Yet while they may be city-centric, they are nevertheless, proudly Māori in kaupapa or focus.

With all these experiences, one might come away thinking, there is no "size 7" shoe, or no "one way" that Māori engage. And that is true. Māori take great pride in having their own "kawa" or way of doing things. You need to respect that. But in spite of the diversity, there are common themes and needs. There are also some tricks of the trade when it comes to engaging with Māori successfully. Here is my version of what is important and needed. I call it "the 5 Wai's (not Why's) of Effective Engagement with Māori".

This framework is flexible. It can be used in a range of ways, including:

- helping your organisation going out to meet with Māori;
- helping you think about Māori who have approached you with an idea or a proposal;
- as the basis for governance training (such as determining your board's "why", and/or using the framework to help guide a strategy to connect with key Māori stakeholders);
- identifying the key cultural competencies for your organisation (what 101s does your team need to understand to better connect with Māori?);
- kicking off a Māori focused policy or approach in your organisation (what is your "why", who do you need to engage with, how might they benefit, and what should you do to be culturally authentic?).

Follow these tips, and work with your team of Māori advisory staff to help understand your 5 Wai's. In my experience you will get the results you are seeking – and then some!

NĀ WAI

As in Nā wai te hui i karanga? or Who set up the hui, and most importantly....why?

First things first, the purpose of any engagement is critical.

Imagine someone in your organisation wants to meet with Māori and they organise a planning meeting? Why do they want to meet or engage with Māori? What is their purpose? What is their why?

To be fair, there is a different situation that is relevant: where Māori are coming to meet with you ...and they want to speak about a topic? Again, think about your “why” in this regard – beyond just being nice. Think about the reason Māori want to meet and connect. How does your organisation think about this topic? What are the organisation’s objectives in relation to the general area? Are there relevant Treaty or legal obligations?

You need to clarify your why. To be fair, this may be iterative. It can change too. But you need to land on this as soon as possible because this helps to shape the nature and focus of the engagement.

KO WAI

As in Ko wai ēnei tāngata? Or who are these people you are engaging or connecting with?

Do your homework. Understand who you are dealing with. Get to know them. This is important if you are going to have a meaningful working relationship. If you are thinking about partnering up with them, do some due diligence.

Who are you engaging with, and working with? Who is this Iwi? What is their story?

What do you know about their history, whakapapa, korero, legal entity, board, their management, partners, successes and failures, and in the area of joint interest, their capability? What do you know about their journey – including their journey to your office door, or to the meeting table?

MO WAI?

Mō wai tēnei kaupapa? or what is the benefit for Māori?

This is really the flipside of the first wai - it's about standing in the shoes of “Māori” and thinking – what is in this engagement or process or hui or policy consultation exercise for them.

Take the scenario of your organisation wanting to meet with an Iwi or a sector group. It's one thing to go out there and think that you can talk to Māori because you want to help them, and so they are benefitting from talking to you. Yet one of the funniest sayings in Māoridom is "We are from Wellington and we have come to help!" Māori don't believe that sorry. In fact, too often, Wellington people stuff things up. A key reason for this is that they don't pay enough attention to clarifying Māori needs.

Consequently, when you are planning a trip to visit Māori or Māori groups, get really clear about the benefits for the people you are visiting. Be sensitive to their needs. Try to understand these. Also, don't be a seagull: don't just drop in and take off. If at all possible, stay as late as possible. Don't leave early to catch a plane. If you can stay to eat together, do it. Māori really respect this, and never forget it.

Finally, it's even better to make yourself well known. If you want to have a long-term relationship, then don't just go once. Reconnect. Go back.

MA WAI

As in Mā wai tatou e korero? Or Ma wai tatou e arahi? Who will speak for us, or who will lead us?

'Ma wai' is about the person or people leading you, making sure you have right team and skill sets, and most of all, making sure you have a cultural navigator.

This is one of my key tips. You will absolutely need a Māori connector or navigator. They will guide you and show you around. But they will also keep you safe.

Sometimes it is someone in your office. Other times, and most of the time, there is a local person who is a well known "connector". They can tell you who is who out there, who the real chief is (including the chieftanesses), and what is going on. If you are heading out to see Māori in the regions, make sure you have one of these. Find that person. Help them to help you.

One more thing that is really, really important is this: please don't engage them as a tekoteko! Culture is not just a before and closing of meetings consideration. Do not use your cultural experts just as the giver of prayers, maker of speeches, and singer of songs! Cultural advice is also relevant to your due diligence.

HE WAI?

As in He wai or Do you have a song?

So the last of my 5 Wai's is about how you connect with Māori, and moreover, trying to connect with cultural respect and authenticity. My simple advice is - make sure you know your Marae 101's: mihi, waiata, hongī.

Be prepared to show that you have done your homework and take a Māori relationship seriously.

Pronounce Māori words properly. Be prepared to stand up and say a mihimihi. Know how to hongī. Learn a waiata. This stuff matters to Māori. They will be pleased at your efforts. Be prepared. It's the Post Treaty Settlement World!

The haka has been nationalized. It's viral. Doing a mihi (which is not only greeting, but letting people know who you are, via your pepehā or cultural gps coordinates), being able to hongī (it's a nose press, not a head butt), and singing a wai: all of this stuff is standard.

But remember too, being prepared also means knowing when to - and when not to. Sometimes there may be a very formal welcome. Other times you may go straight into business. All that may be needed is a simple mihi. Trust your local guide or navigator as they will ensure you do the right thing at the right time - or in other words, get the tikanga right.

So...follow these tips, understand your 5 Wai's, work with your team of Māori advisory and support staff, and go for it!