

The role of Kaumātua *Foundation North*



**FOUNDATION
NORTH**
*Te Kaitiaki Pūtea o
Tāmaki o Tai Tokerau*

Introduction



Foundation North kaumātua, Kevin Prime. In 2016, Mātua Kevin received an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit for his services to conservation and Māori.

Foundation North seeks actively to foster integrity of purpose in its organisational life and mission. It relies upon a range of mechanisms to ensure that governance and operational decision-making and actions are aligned with its core commitments.

In November 2009, the Foundation established the role of Kaumātua to help guide, support and challenge Trustees and staff in their endeavours to implement an organisational commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. All agreed that such a role was needed to help ensure that the Foundation and its contributors recognise, respect and respond appropriately to Māori interests, concerns and ways of doing things. Former Chair of Foundation North, Kevin Prime, was appointed to the role, with the unanimous support of Trustees. This paper outlines the context, role and responsibilities of the Kaumātua at Foundation North, and may serve as a useful guide in other organisational settings.

The context for the role of Kaumātua

Foundation North seeks to uphold a commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and in particular to engage effectively with iwi, hapū, and Māori communities and organisations in its region. It has also identified two strategic objectives that relate specifically to Māori:

To develop ongoing commitment to raising educational outcomes for Māori and Pacific communities

To enhance equity for Māori through the ongoing development of a Māori strategy to ensure that the Foundation's programmes and policies are accessible for these communities.

Understanding what Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty) means in the context of a community trust and progressing strategic objectives in relation to Māori requires particular knowledge, experience, judgement and community connections. The Foundation has relied upon a number of mechanisms to help inform its decision-making and organisational practice in relation to Māori. Such mechanisms have included the appointment of Māori Trustees and staff; the establishment of a Māori and Pacific Committee; the development of a reference group and selection committee structure for its Māori and Pacific Education Initiative; the practice of undertaking hui on marae so as to engage more effectively with iwi, hapū, and Māori communities and organisations in its rohe; the invitation to respected Māori researchers and leaders working in various sectors to address Trustees from time to time; and ongoing work on Māori strategy and action plans.

In the past, the Foundation has also looked to individual Trustees and others to perform the kinds of responsibilities that might usually be expected of a kaumātua.

Moi Becroft, project manager of the Foundation's Māori and Pacific Education Initiative (MPEI), reflected that: "In the MPEI journey the presence of kaumātua (in particular Ngapo Wehi, Kevin Prime and Waitai Petera) helped to ensure the cultural and spiritual safety of decision-makers on our Māori Reference Group and Selection Committee. Kaumātua also supported staff when we were organising hui; they leaned on their relationships with iwi, hapū and Māori across the rohe (area) to smooth the way forward and provided the mana and cultural safety necessary for authentic mana whenua engagement. Often, kaumātua were actively engaged in protocols and processes that most of us were unaware of, and yet the observance of such protocols and processes was necessary for maintaining relationships and running successful hui. For the Foundation, the presence of kaumātua also provided grounding and eldership in a Māori setting."

But as Trustee and respected kaumātua, Waitai Petera, observed at a Foundation North meeting, "The Foundation may not always be able to rely on its own membership for such guidance; a dedicated role will help to ensure continuity of commitment and advice in relation to things Māori." Kristen Kohere-Soutar, co-chair of the Foundation's Māori and Pacific Committee at that time, added that the expertise of a kaumātua "is needed to assist the Foundation to engage effectively with Māori communities, particularly in the North and with other high Māori population areas in its rohe."

Convinced of its merits, Trustees decided to establish a formal role to perform the kinds of functions usually associated with a kaumātua, including clear responsibilities and a mandate to act in a leadership capacity on behalf of the Foundation.

The role of a kaumātua

"The main purpose of the role is to help ensure that Māori voices are heard, that Māori interests are understood and skilfully negotiated"

In a community trust and other organisational settings, the role of the kaumātua can help to guide the way in relation to Treaty commitments and especially in regard to things Māori. The main purpose of the role is to help ensure that Māori voices are heard, that Māori interests are understood and skilfully negotiated, that due respect is observed in the performance of Māori protocols, and that Māori strategies are properly informed so as to ensure equity for Māori.

The role of the kaumātua in this setting requires some essential attributes, namely fluency in te reo Māori; an understanding of the tikanga of all the iwi in the rohe; a broad and well informed appreciation of iwi and Māori interests; a reasonable command of the English language; and political astuteness. Other attributes are also highly desirable, such as wide iwi networks (and on a practical level, knowing who in particular to contact when required); broad community networks; reasonable oral and written skills; an understanding of the voluntary sector; an understanding of the role, responsibilities and processes of governance; and a sense of humour.

Exercising leadership in respect of tikanga Māori

What then are the key responsibilities of the role of the kaumātua in the setting of a community trust like Foundation North?

As in other settings, a principal responsibility of the kaumātua is to exercise leadership in respect of tikanga Māori. This responsibility requires providing direction, answering questions, carrying out Māori protocols and translating their meanings for others who may be unfamiliar with them. The role of the kaumātua is to understand, and where necessary explain, the protocols operating in other places. A kaumātua knows that one must always act diplomatically in relation to the kawa (customs) of other groups. He will find ways to bring together Māori groups and/or other cultures, negotiating differences with diplomacy and respect.

On marae or at hui (gatherings), the kaumātua will perform certain responsibilities such as leading or replying to mihi (speeches) as the case may be, as well as directing those in organisational roles (such as a community trust board's chair, trustees, chief executive or other staff) so that their manner and movements respect local ways. At times, the kaumātua will walk in front and at other times sit beside those in leadership roles (especially a board chair or chief executive), quietly translating the exchanges taking place in Māori - words and actions - and suggesting a way forward.

A kaumātua is usually aware of what has gone on before and the whakapapa links that enable people and groups to connect spiritually and socially. At hui, a kaumātua will seek to put across important messages with humour, honesty and frankness, all the while exercising a measure of humility that allows others to embrace their leadership. A kaumātua takes care to ensure that people stick to the agenda of hui so as to achieve what they set out to do.

Upholding the kaupapa by keeping things on track

“A kaumātua always remembers the teachings of his elders such as: You have two ears and one mouth so you should listen twice as much as you talk; put simply, listen more, speak less.”

You also have two hands that can feel, so put them out and feel the wairua around you. In exercising the merits of such wisdom, sometimes a kaumātua will intervene to stop things from going off track or harming the kaupapa (purpose) of the hui or upsetting people.

When things are not heading in the right direction or when people start to criticise one another, then a kaumātua will usually take action. His job is to smooth the waters when people become irate and help them to focus on the issues that brought them together, rather than allow them to digress. He will find a way to stop the discussion so as to remind people of the kaupapa or he may take other action to keep the whānau together. A kaumātua never forgets his responsibility to make every effort to keep people close and tight so that a sense of unity can flourish.

Being available, approachable and accessible

Mostly a kaumātua will lead from behind; his role is to make things happen by acting in a supportive role from the sides. Being available and stepping up when needed are requirements of the kaumātua role.

A kaumātua will, for example, seek to honour his appointments so that he is present at the right time and in the right place to give the right advice, quietly enabling things to proceed smoothly. A kaumātua will also seek to be approachable so that people know where to turn when they need to discuss problems and find answers to their questions.

In the setting of a community trust, a kaumātua will often need to be easily accessible by phone and email. Some things however are better discussed kano ki te kano (face-to-face). A kaumātua will be able to recognise which things can be handled efficiently by means of technology and which matters are better addressed face-to-face. If a kaumātua suggests the latter, then it is usually prudent to take up his suggestion because there will be a good reason for it. A kaumātua is there to give advice but will never expect of others anything that he himself is not prepared to do. A kaumātua is always thinking of others and never for himself.

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An example of kaumātua advice

A kaumātua will usually respond to any question that is put sincerely to him. How does an organisation like Foundation North effectively engage Māori Trustees, staff and advisors in meetings? The following comments provide an example of the kind of advice one might receive from a person acting in the role of kaumātua.

In Māori culture, we wait for words. We do not come rushing in; instead we show respect for the long pause that sometimes precedes a speaker's korero. Māori speakers are taught from a young age to measure their words carefully and doing so calls for thoughtful consideration. We therefore give space for the thoughtfulness that precedes speech. When English isn't the first language of the speaker, we take care to allow time for the translation of words and their meanings.

For Māori, the height of rudeness is to cut across another speaker, whereas for other cultures this action may be seen as an expression of enthusiasm or intellectual engagement. Māori cannot go against the time-honoured values and practices of our culture; therefore, good leadership must seek to develop a way to create space for Māori speakers so that they may find and then speak their thoughts without interruption.

Good leadership will detect how best to engage Māori speakers. Such leadership does not assume that just because Māori do not speak we have nothing to say. Rather, the opposite is the case; the assumption is that Māori have a lot to contribute and especially on matters that affect them. Good leadership will create space for Māori to speak.

There are a number of ways in which good leadership can intentionally create space for Māori speakers.

One way to create space for a Māori speaker, especially where te reo is their first language, is to invite them to speak in their own language first or, as we say, "to korero Māori". This approach will give a Māori speaker the opportunity to respond as he or she feels fit. Many of us for whom te reo Māori is our first language, think most of the time in Māori. When we are given the space to speak in our own language, we not only find our thoughts but also are then able to translate quite quickly our thinking into English.

Another approach, say in a board meeting, is to "do a round" in which each person at the table is given a turn to speak without interruption. A third approach is to respectfully invite comment from a Māori contributor, and then wait patiently for the reply; they will tell you if they have nothing to add.

Conclusion

The decision of Foundation North to formally establish the role of Kaumātua sought to recognise, respect and value the knowledge, judgement, experience and connections required to provide informed advice and fulfil associated responsibilities in relation to Māori.

It also indicates that the Foundation values its relationships with Māori and is concerned about their interests. The Foundation is doing vital work in the Auckland and Northland regions, which includes making a significant contribution to many Māori initiatives and Māori wellbeing. Its role of Kaumātua guides and supports principle-based decision-making, strategic initiatives and culturally appropriate action, particularly relating to tikanga Māori and the Foundation's ongoing engagement with iwi, hapū and Māori communities and organisations based in the region.

For Foundation North Chief Executive Officer, Jennifer Gill, the formal establishment of the role was a welcome and necessary development in organisational life and mission. "Good intentions will only take you so far and may lead to disappointments if not fulfilled. Sound decision-making and appropriate action is needed to demonstrate integrity of purpose. The role of the Kaumātua plays a vital part in assisting the Foundation to uphold its Treaty commitments and to continue developing informed policy and practice in relation to Māori."

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