

Rebuilding Leadership in Tonga: The *Tupakapakanava* Approach

by

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Greetings & Salutation

Madam Chair, thank you for your kind welcome and introduction.
Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Thank you for your presence this evening.

Introduction

The people-accounts on leadership in and of Tonga seem distressing. For those who care, such news is sad and concerning. Commonly, such reports speak of age-old foundations of Tongan society being shaken, eroded, displaced or broken. They refer to social contracts between leaders and people being lost- burnt in flames! It would seem that the trust people have of leaders has diminished or vanished. Ordinary Tongans seem anxious, more than is usual. People appear in need of hope—for better leadership.

When such accounts, while emotionally loaded, are conveyed about the leadership of any community, then the situation is serious. A patched-up, quick-fixed, louver-replacement intervention, although generously funded, is inadequate. Nor are numerous activity-filled programs satisfactory, even with able individuals at the helm. In times as these, the leadership need is greater, the cause more paramount. Such are times for a serious leadership rebuilding agenda. Such an agenda demands vision, commitment and perseverance by all who care.

In this presentation, I offer suggestions of a framework for rebuilding leadership in Tonga. A framework is a guide, providing broad parameters and direction, often without the necessary priorities, strategies and other details. I intend only to keep to broad ideas, presenting these as seeds sewn for possible watering and nurturing by those who choose to. In your quest for raising the bar of leadership in Tonga, you may find value from these seeds of thought.

Throughout my presentation, I use the term leadership liberally to embrace people, structures, processes, resources and actions as these are aligned to the aspirations and visions of Tongans within their organizations and communities. Such a broad conceptualization of leadership is necessary for my purpose, which is, to suggest a vision; couched in a leadership rebuilding framework and a culturally familiar approach.

I now propose four key areas of attention for rebuilding leadership in Tonga.

Restoration of leadership

First, a key area of attention in any leadership rebuilding agenda is to restore leadership. Particularly following a period of slackness, abuse or neglect by leaders or of leadership, there is generally, an urgent need for restoring of leadership. The need for restoring assumes that leadership has been absent or is weak, ineffective or compromised. The task of restoration requires leaders to step in or step up. If leaders don't step up, people will rightly ask: Where are the leaders? Who are the leaders? Why aren't they leading?

Recently, Her Royal Highness Princess Regent stepped up when leadership visibility was needed. Following the tragic sinking of the MV Princess Ashika, Tongans all over the country were

devastated with grief and loss. Numerous important questions needed to be answered. Yet, the government, as an owner of the ill-fated MV Princess Ashika, seemed to duck and dive from its responsibilities to answer and explain. Uncertainty was widespread as grieving families awaited news of their loved ones, deemed drowned. The government's actions merely fuelled people's anger and frustration. In the midst of this crisis situation, it was reported that Her Royal Highness took personal interest in comforting the grieving families. She was reported to have been visibly present with the people; empathising with their loss and offering them comfort and love. This act by Her Royal Highness is an example of restoring leadership, when needed.

Concerns over leadership in Tonga are not new. Observers whose ears are close to the ground will say that in the last few years, Tongan people have expressed repeated concerns over the behaviours, performance or credibility of national, organizational, kainga, industry, civil or church leaders. Some would have considered these concerns as crisis points. People would have felt that when their leaders were needed most, they were nowhere to be seen.

Leaders must not leave such concerns ignored or unresolved. Instead, when leadership concerns are legitimately expressed, the real leaders must, in response, assume responsibility for resolving the issues. When leaders demonstrate leadership that is needed, this is an act of restoration. Acts of restoring leadership are quickly and responsively done by good leaders.

I note that current leadership needs of Tonga are varied. At some levels, there is need for clarity of vision or for stability. At other levels, the needs are for efficient or effective leadership. Good leaders of Tonga will be burned in their hearts by these needs, and will rise to act appropriately. Good leaders will resolve such challenges through their active and sincere engagement, by being visible and in helping to resolve and meet the needs of the hour for their communities.

Repair and rebuild brokenness

The second key area of attention in a leadership rebuilding agenda relates to repairing and rebuilding brokenness. Similar to the first area of attention, following a period of leadership neglect or abuse, a community often experiences considerable brokenness.

Brokenness manifests itself in different ways, including people experiencing sustained low morale, feeling hurt, experiencing severed, strained and unresolved relationships within kainga, organizations or country. Church Ministers will tell us that often people may be church-goers or may have moved sideways into another denomination, but they could be hurting emotionally or starving spiritually. At the family, village, organizational or national levels, when leaders neglect their connectedness with their communities, these communities tend to experience more or rapid decline in morality, or see a hastened pace of social disintegration. Brokenness as emotional, spiritual and relational ailments is common and Tongan society is no exception.

Leaders of Tonga will need to give attention to this key area of rebuilding leadership. They will need to identify, deal with and repair the different kinds of brokenness which might be present within their organizations and communities. If leaders are not themselves competent or compassionate to repair brokenness, then those who can and are must be supported to provide leadership for this task. In this way, further rot is prevented and relationships restored.

At this point in its societal reform schedule, Tonga must clear all rubbles before the country rebuilds. Good leaders must not be neglectful in ignoring or partially repairing brokenness within their communities. I say this because when leaders refuse or fail to repair brokenness fully, people are not freed, hearts are not warmed and relationships are not nourished. Without freedom of hearts, people cannot be emotionally healthy. Nor can they live wholesome lives or experience greater sense of community fulfilment.

Replace what has been lost

Third, another key area for attention in a leadership rebuilding agenda relates to the need for replacing what has been lost. Recent tragic events in Tonga, including the marathon national strike by civil servants and 16/11, have inflicted serious blows to the social cohesiveness of the country. From a leadership perspective, such sad events have highlighted certain things which Tonga may have lost.

So what may have been lost? I observe that Tonga has lost some important things. Within some quarters, individuals or categories of community, organizational or national leaders have lost the trust of their people. Individuals may still be called by their titles or are basking in privileges, but their people are possibly according them respect merely out of duty. Respect that is given involuntarily is not respect but compliance. At a grassroots level, poor leadership has led to some kainga groups having lost their visions, purpose and sense of leadership credibility. Sadly, without vision and purpose, such groups soon disintegrate, become dysfunctional and cease to exist, meaningfully. Within formal institutions, there are organisational processes, behaviours and practices or systems of leadership within Government, Church or industry which may have lost their credibility, in the eyes of ordinary Tongans. Certainly, Tonga as a country has lost time, resources and development progress as results of 16/11 and other recent tragic events.

For something to be lost means it is no longer there! Often, anything valuable takes time to rebuild, restore or replace. As essential principles of leadership, respect, trust and credibility take time and effort to replace. Moreover, leaders cannot hope to replace lost respect, lost trust or lost credibility with money, titles, status or power. When such essential values are lost, they must also be replaced by the same types! The sad reality however is that replacing such values often takes a lifetime. This is because these values are earned, through time. Followers choose to accord these values to leaders, often in small units of measure!

Good Tongan leaders will give appropriate attention to this key task of replacing that which is lost. Depending on the needs and priorities, personal, institutional, process and relational repairs and replacements may need to be made. Long term actions and strategies need to be given to this important leadership rebuilding task.

Renew hope for the future

The fourth key area of attention in a leadership rebuilding agenda relates to rebuilding of hope for the future.

Human experience has a tendency to pull people down. As individuals, we despair when our energies sap, our relationships constrained, our love adrift or our dignity denied. As communities and organizations, we lose heart when resources are wasted or inadequate, when members are fuming or fighting, when vision is unclear or absent; and when leaders are not listening or not mentoring. But such is life!

However, the good news is that there is a flip side to this pulling-down or gravity tendency. That flip side is hope. Hope is a human necessity. It energises, restores, calms and elevates the human spirit. People as individuals and members of communities, including families, organizations, villages, schools or a country, need hope. This need for hope is even greater (a) in times of trouble, disaster and crisis and (b) during times of uncertainty, change and societal dynamism.

A casual examination of Tongan society shows people longing for hope. The youth seem anxious about their futures. Older generations of Tongans are uncertain about the strength of established institutions to withstand the challenges of newer times. Citizens appear disappointed with the repeated poor behaviour and performance of their public leaders. Villagers seem dissatisfied with the incompetence of town officers and community leaders. Young, energetic and competent Tongan professionals are yearning for opportunities to grow, to contribute or to be valued. Minority groups

(economic, intellectual, physical or generational) are concerned about their marginalisation. This list of examples is long.

Leaders of Tonga are urged to listen to and hear the cries of their people, for hope. Political rhetoric and promises do not offer hope. Even verbal assurances of 'saipe ia' are no longer enough, to give people hope. Empty words without empathy do not assure a craving spirit. Double standards do not convince doubting minds. Personal indulgencies, though deserving, do not calm longing stomachs.

Hope, real hope, is offered through action – appropriate, timely and courageous. Good leaders will act- personally, organizationally and societally- to assure people of a better future. Good leaders will want to change themselves first, before changing their people for a better future.

Surveying the challenge of re-building leadership

Properly surveyed, the needs and hence the tasks of rebuilding leadership in Tonga are enormous. These tasks need to be prioritized. Time does not allow me to discuss the issue of prioritization in this presentation, and I hope that Tongan leaders might do this for their kainga, schools, departments and Churches.

Briefly, the following can be said. For each of the four key areas of attention (discussed above), needs must be identified, resources mobilized and strategies explored. As in any rebuilding agenda, not all is lost! It may be that there are large sections of a wall that have fallen, or that floors have rotted away, or some foundation posts have been structurally damaged. At the same time, one or two foundation posts might still be standing firmly, a door might just need repainting or a leaking tap might function fully with a new washer.

Once the needs are clearly ascertained, priorities can be agreed upon. Good leaders will want to undertake such preparatory work well before they decide on the 'how' question.

How should rebuilding of leadership be approached?

It would seem that rebuilding of leadership in Tonga has started with the nation-state as its unit of attention. The national unit has become the template for rebuilding leadership. The national unit has become the starting point, and may well be the only point. This approach is espoused in institutional reforms and good governance interventions and heavily supported and generously funded by international organizations, donor agencies, Pacific regional organizations and the state. The unit of attention seems to be the nation-state. The focus of attention seems to be on the institution, in its formalized forms. The direction of attention is largely, top-down.

In my view, this broad approach to rebuilding leadership is negligent, in these ways. The complex web of needs and priorities in a leadership rebuilding agenda are ignored. The Churches seem to be either marginalized or sidelined. The kainga, including its diaspora forms, are not fully engaged. The youth and students, the educated Tongan professional, the community leader and the villager have been made as bystanders, watching, cheering or jeering on. The kava club, the church pulpit, the talanoa at the market or by the beach, and Tongan processes and protocols of capacity or leadership rebuilding have all been treated as non-essentials.

In rejecting the national unit as an appropriate template for a leadership rebuilding agenda, I am proposing that Tonga examines what I call, the 'Tupakapakanava Approach', in exploring the 'how' of leadership rebuilding in Tonga.

The Tupakapakanava Approach

Because you are all very familiar with the Tupakapakanava and its processes, please bear with me. My presentation requires me to briefly describe the processes of this fascinating lighting of the torches

ceremony as I had witnessed during past birthday celebrations of the late King Tupou 1V. I am focusing here on the processes and relationships as opposed to the significance of the ceremony.

As I understand, the Tupakapakanava involves school children bringing along their coconut frond torches and jointly, lighting up an entire waterfront in Nukualofa. Children will come with their siblings or mates, and in their small groups, take up their places along the waterfront. Upon arrival, they will immediately get their torches ready; tying, retying and positioning their torches purposefully. Supply piles will be stacked up close by. As more children arrive, they will take up their own spaces. Late comers will fill in gaps, as they see these or extend the line of torches further at both ends. At the given time, the torches are lit, by each child within their assumed spaces. Through the busyness, challenge and fun of the Tupakapakanava, older children commonly step up to assume responsibility; often supervising, managing and helping the younger ones. Younger ones too are active, igniting their own torches, learning to re-bind loose torches, and holding their own torches high to shine. As torches die off, new ones are lit. Throughout the entire period, instructions are given, opinions are expressed, and tussles between younger siblings are negotiated and settled, all by the children themselves, under the watchful eyes of adults.

The combined impact of all that has been described is that an entire waterfront is lit up, giving light to the surrounding area; and is sustained by the children working together, but within their assigned spaces. The light which is produced is seen from miles afar.

What has this account to do with an approach for rebuilding leadership in Tonga? Allow me to explain.

Application of Tupakapakanava Approach

Unlike a national unit approach, the Tupakapakanava focuses on smaller units of attention. While the overall responsibility for the ceremony rests with the Ministry of Education, education officials do not play a direct implementation role. Instead, children are left to execute the vision of the Tupakapakanava ceremony. At the waterfront, the groups take up their own assumed spaces, organizing themselves into manageable units, playing their part in a wider mandate, evaluating their own performance, rectifying their own weaknesses and sustaining their own excellence as they perceive these to be.

In the Tongan context, smaller units for leadership rebuilding might be the kainga, the local church, the village community, the school, the department or the kava club. By starting lower first, members of such units can more easily assume responsibility for their assumed spaces. In small units, people generally own their front yards. They tend to have the most stake in and concern for their front yards. Individuals are likely to more readily rebuild themselves as leaders in their front yards, first. Using the proposed framework for rebuilding leadership, leaders in small units across Tongan society might be encouraged to start the work in their own front yards; restoring, repairing, replacing that which is lost, and renewing hope for their own members, first.

The Tupakapakanava approach focuses on people. In this case, the attention is on the children, rather than in highlighting institutional and organizational issues. The children are left to take initiative, to mobilize themselves, to enjoy themselves and have fun with others, to develop certain skills and obtain certain knowledge in their participation in the Tupakapakanava.

By focusing on people, the Tupakapakanava approach gives freedom to the children to make the torches, transport themselves down to the waterfront, and assume their own spaces. The approach permits the children to take ownership of their own spaces and lighting up the torches, supervising and training younger children; while sustaining the fires to give light for as long as possible. It is the combined effect of responsible action within assumed spaces that lights up an entire waterfront.

The Tupakapakanava approach recognizes difference, supports it and sustains it for the greater good. At any Tupakapakanava ceremony, all children groups are different. Their membership numbers or ages differ. Their priority needs differ. The pace of their activities is not the same. While some of the processes may be similar for different groups, these are happening at different times. The combined effect of small units working together is that all groups are contributing towards lighting up the waterfront quickly and effectively.

The capacity to embrace difference also highlights the approach's scope to embrace complexities as well as to be responsive to multiple situations. In any leadership rebuilding agenda, the nature of the challenge is complex, requiring clarity and focus. At the same time a rebuilding agenda requires work to be done concurrently at multiple levels, against odds that are internal and external. The Tupakapakanava has potential for absorbing the challenge of complexity in a responsive manner.

The Tupakapakanava approach is participative and developmental. All children, as well as adults in-attendance are active participants in a Tupakapakanava ceremony. All are keenly engaging. All are inclusively treated. All are learning. Younger siblings are being mentored, sharpening skills and receiving instant evaluation and feedback. Older siblings are also training in supervision, team-building and mentoring. Mistakes are permitted, made and learnt from by both younger and older siblings alike. Attending adults often cheer or coach in the background.

Given the leadership needs of Tonga, I suggest that a more participative, inclusive and developmental approach is needed. The Tupakapakanava approach offers a real possibility for Tongans to actively engage in the rebuilding of their own kainga, local churches, districts, schools and departments. This approach offers opportunities for societal mentoring of leaders, where all willing Tongans can be nurtured to appreciate and value oneself and community. As stated, this approach places emphasis on people first, as opposed to highlighting formalized institutions, structural organisms and their systems of behaviours.

When the Tupakapakanava approach is used, the combined attention is more likely to make the greater leadership impact for Tonga. If Tonga's leaders, at all levels of society and within their various assumed spaces rise up and lead together, the rebuilding agenda of leadership becomes more effective, efficient and quickly achievable.

The good news

Consistent with this suggested approach, a group of New Generation Tongan leaders have begun to mentor and train younger leaders- students of Tonga & Tailulu colleges, TIOE staff and others. Under their mentors, Seu'ula Fua, Paul Fonua, 'Isikeli Oko, Liuaki Fusitua, Kalo Mafi and others, these students are assuming leadership responsibility for themselves and their schools, with the support of their mentors, teachers and senior Tongan education and community leaders.

Rather than wait for instruction or for an external miracle, these young leaders have begun to rebuild leadership in their own assumed spaces, first. As leadership is made firmer in the assumed small units, further purposeful influence, extension and growth are explored to enhance leadership rebuilding within other spaces in Tongan society. In the end, these humble initiatives will work collaboratively with others, spreading a ngatu of influence and combining to raise the bar of leadership in Tonga.

But these New Generation Tongan leaders are not alone in their efforts. They are a part of a wider Pacific regional initiative, The Leadership Pacific, which has the vision of "Growing 1,000 New Generation Pacific Leaders by 2015". The hope of this Pacific-wide vision is that Pacific Islanders will raise the bar of leadership in the region, thereby creating a more peaceful and stable environment and allowing us to deal better with the challenges of our times.

Conclusion & thanks

To restate, I have suggested a framework for rebuilding leadership in Tonga. I advocated that a leadership rebuilding agenda must give attention to four key areas of need. I further recommended the Tupakapakanava approach as a way of rebuilding leadership, within my suggested areas of attention. Implicitly, I am rejecting a national unit approach, arguing instead that smaller units in Tongan society must be the starting point for rebuilding leadership. Within smaller units, Tongan leaders can be encouraged to assume responsibility for, mobilize participation in, manage and lead their leadership rebuilding efforts, beginning within their assumed spaces. In this way, leaders are able to build people first, before enhancing their processes and aligning these with clearer leadership visions at the levels of the kainga, village, school, local church and department.

Like all bold steps, courage is needed in the use of the Tupakapakanava approach. Particularly within a societal reform environment, courage and perseverance are needed as Tongans engage in learning to lead and follow in anticipation of a more democratic culture of leadership.

With those remarks, Madam Chair, thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts on rebuilding leadership in Tonga. Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you again for your attention and participation.

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